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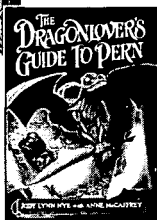
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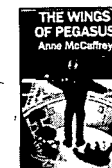
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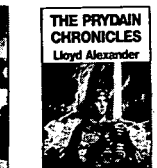
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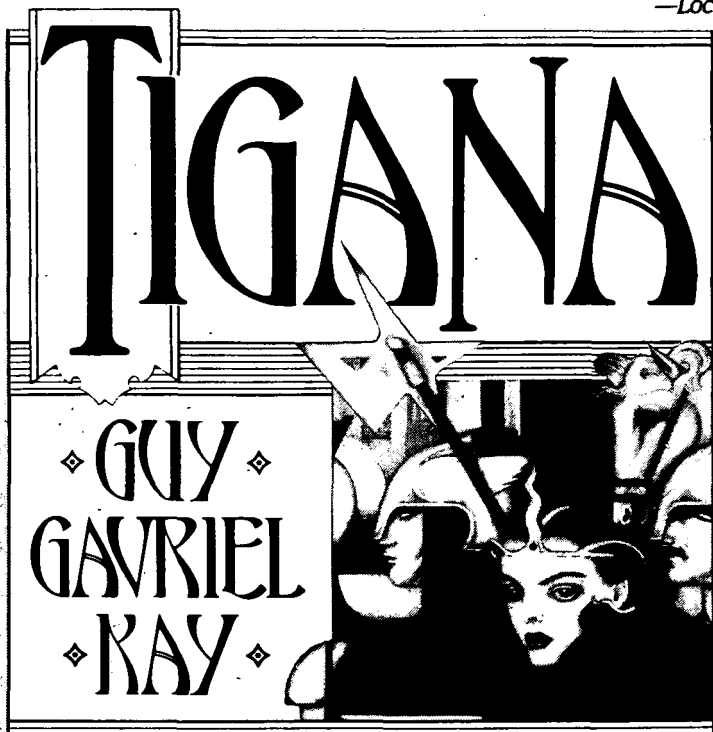
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Editorial

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

I HAVE JUST finished the latest paperback Sue Grafton mystery novel, *G is for Gumshoe*, and I was startled to discover that the entire novel focuses on child abuse. Before I read Sue Grafton, I read Andrew Vachss' most recent book to hit paperback, *Blossom*, and that novel, as do many of his others, deals with child abuse. This weekend I also had the pleasure to read a novel in manuscript by a well-known sf writer. This book, due out from Bantam in the fall of '92, has scenes of child abuse.

Is child abuse the most recent titillating subject for genre writers? Or is something else going on here?

Before I answer those questions, let me bring up a few others. In recent months, F&SF has received a number of letters complaining about violence in our fiction, horror fiction in general, and scenes of child abuse/incest in particular. The readers complain that these things offend them, that such fiction is not escapism, and therefore does not belong in the

pages of F&SF.

These readers have legitimate complaints. It's difficult to read something for relaxation and have a scene reach across the page and slap you in the face. A romantic novel did that to me last year in a Perkins restaurant in Rapid City, South Dakota. I was reading to relax on my travels, when the author killed off a three-year-old boy — something I didn't believe she would do (this was a *romance* novel after all, and the kid was the much-beloved brother of the protagonist). Not only did I burst into tears in public (something I hate to do), but I spent the rest of the day enraged that such a child's hideous death could happen in escapist fiction. I made the mistake of watching the movie *Dead Poet's Society* two weeks after the death of my father, and when a death occurred in the movie, I shut it off and sobbed so hard that I thought I was going to make myself sick. I didn't watch the ending of that movie for many, many months.

I empathize with the complaints

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But there was one thing Eveshka did not know. For years Ilyana was visited by a ghostly boy... and now she was falling in love. And when Eveshka recognized the boy, she knew that dark magic was once more loose in her world.

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— I have felt that way myself hundreds of times — but I believe the letter writers have missed the point of fiction.

Fiction places order upon a chaotic world.

Simple statement, but true. Fiction, not non-fiction, explores who we are, why we are, and what we make of our lives. Fiction, particularly science fiction, explores where we're going, and how we can improve things when we get there. And fiction, because of what it does, always reflects the world we live in.

I have expressed surprise to friends over the past few months because I have received only a handful of stories dealing with the Gulf War. Perhaps that is because we are still in the denial stage (people's response to war follows the same pattern as their response to other kinds of death: denial, anger, and finally acceptance), and no one can write out of denial. Or perhaps it is because the full impact of that war has still to be felt in this country. I suspect that Israeli and Saudi writers are dealing with the issues the war raised (and the Iraqis are still too enmeshed in the aftermath to think about such luxuries as art).

Which, in a circular way, brings us back to the novels about child abuse. Child abuse has reached endemic proportions in the United

States. Some studies show that one out of five children suffer *physical* effects of child abuse. The children who suffer from emotional abuse number nearly twice that. Child abuse is not trendy. It's there. It's something we as a nation are dealing with and as such becomes fit subject for fiction.

As does violence.

Such things belong in fiction not to titillate, but to help us understand. To help us as readers empathize with people in positions that we have never faced — or to help us process solutions to problems that we have always had. Both of the incidents I mentioned above occurred near the death of my father, as my subconscious was dealing with the senselessness of death and the meaning of existence. The fictional works tapped into that subconscious train of thought and brought out the emotion I was feeling — rage. In seeking to escape, I encountered the very thing I was running from. That became a personal dilemma for me as a reader, one I solved by reading mysteries through the denial period — structured mysteries in which death was a logical outcropping of events, something that could be solved with a clue here, and a clue there. Mysteries put an order on the chaos I was feeling at that point in my life.

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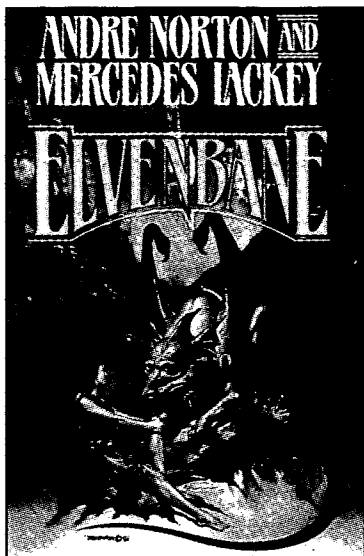
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All of this does not mean that fiction always has to be issue-oriented or deadly serious. The first job of fiction is, after all, to entertain. But the very best fiction brings a nugget of truth to that entertainment, a nugget that at times is difficult to face.

I enjoy getting letters from readers, for they make me think. I have been grappling for some time with the fictional equivalent of music theory — what is fiction,

why is fiction, and how important is it. I'm sure that as my thoughts develop, more of these editorials will crop up.

Fiction is still an escape for me. A refuge, as it is for many of you. The stories that follow brought a number of pleasant hours to me. I hope they do to you, too. And if an unexpected emotion pops up while you read, stop and examine it. It might mean that you have mined a nugget of truth.



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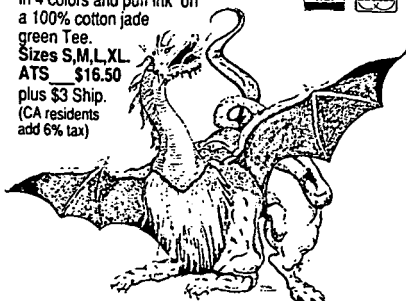
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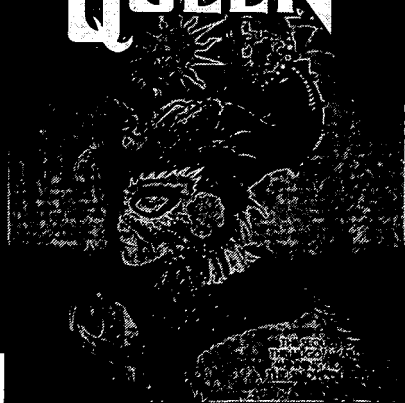
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Ian R. MacLeod is a British writer with only a handful of sales to his name. Still, he has managed to gain attention, and a Nebula finalist position, with stunning stories in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Interzone, Amazing Stories, and Weird Tales. His first story in F&SF is also strong. "The Perfect Stranger" is a moody science fiction story about a dream vacation. It examines the importance of memory, love and time.

The Perfect Stranger

By Ian R. MacLeod

A S I WATCHED the flying boat alight in the bay, I thought, This is what Heaven must be like. Along the quay the other island guests were smiling, expectant, nervous, sharing, whispering their secret hopes; laughing, even, at the strangeness of it all.

Above the stuccoed buildings of the little town, huge lips on a billboard formed the word *Welcome*, a warm breath that carried on the breeze across blue water, was held shimmering in the arms of tropical hills.

The props of the flying boat slowed, and her prow drifted to face the breeze. A passenger tug fanned across the water. Soon reunited couples were walking back along the quay, hand in hand, arm in arm, but still—and understandably—uncertain of each other. I checked the note again in the pocket of my shorts. *Meena*. Was that an Indian name? Should I be looking for someone with black hair, dark skin . . .

Lin the tour guide came over. She was dressed in a gorgeous blue

sarong, busy with her clipboard. "Still haven't found your wife, Marius?"

I shrugged. "I wouldn't know if I had."

"Of course." She smiled brightly. She took my arm and led me through the happy press of bodies along the quay.

"Marius, this is Meena," she said.

A tall and elegant woman turned at the sound of her name. Tall, yes; I'd somehow imagined that. But there was no trace of my Indian lady. Meena had pale brown skin, marvelous green eyes . . . or was that just this tropical light? No, I decided. It was she; she was beautiful. I stared at Meena. Meena stared back at me. What else was there to do?

"It's true, isn't it?" Meena said, her face suddenly breaking from seriousness. Laughing. "What they say — I really can't remember you."

I stepped forward. "Anyway, Meena. I'm glad you're here."

She held out her hand. Unable to tell if she was being ironic, I took it in both of mine. Then she leaned forward and let me kiss her cheek. We stepped back and smiled again. On the hillside above the harbor, the lips on the billboard smiled with us. They breathed the word *Welcome*.

"Do you know how long you've been here?" Meena asked as our Jeep took us along the rough coast road to our bungalow. She seemed happy and relaxed, her right foot up on the rusty dashboard, her khaki dress pushed back to her thighs.

"Not long," I said. I lifted my hands from the steering wheel and leaned across the gearshift. Meena let me kiss her, parting her lips, pressing with her tongue. The Jeep slowed, then took control. It rumbled on between the brilliant sea, the white sand, the chattering jungle. Better than we did, it knew the way.

When my hand strayed along her thigh, Meena caught it firmly.

"Let's wait," she said. "It's sweeter to wait."

So I sat watching Meena as she drifted across the pine and rugs of our bedroom, lifting dresses from her case. All the doors and windows were thrown wide. She was seemingly casual, absorbed. But sometimes she would lean close to me, let her bare arm brush my cheek. Or she would stand and stretch at the window, where white curtains billowed with the beat of the waves. I wondered if it could ever feel this way with a true stranger, whether this slow, delicious dance was some pattern we instinctively remembered from our life together. Are people ever this happy? I wondered. Could things have ever been this good?

"There's one odd thing," Meena said, closing the doors of the wardrobe, turning to face me. "The tour people don't let you take anything with you, do they? But when the flying boat was over the ocean, I looked in my case and found this."

It was in her hand. She held it out.

"A photograph of me. Now, Marius, isn't that odd. . . ?"

I found the evidence quite by accident one day when I was going through Meena's drawers. We worked different hours. I generally saw my prospects mornings and evenings at their homes. The people Meena dealt with were mostly retired, available during what would have once been called office hours. But I liked having the middle of the day to myself; I liked the cold solitude of our flat, being able to get stuff done, being able to go through Meena's things.

I was in a good mood that morning as the Volvo took me home through the ruins of the city. I had completed two sales, and another one looked likely. All three were for the Grade-A security package, which cost the most, tied the client to an open-ended maintenance agreement, and paid the highest commission. Sensing my mood, the Volvo played Dvorák's *American Quartet*.

Through the automatic gates leading into our estate, the Volvo cruised past sooty Grecian pillars, weeping stucco. But for the perpetual absence of sunlight, it could have been an old Hollywood slum. The flats were higher on the hill, for people like us who couldn't afford houses, closer to the ravaged sky. One of the Big Companies had recently put up an advertising billboard on the roadside. Huge lips parted and smiled down at me. Overriding Dvorák on the Volvo's speakers, they murmured close to my ear, a voice creamy with digitized sexuality. Escape, the voice purred, stretching along my spine like a cat. Treat yourself to the one luxury that money can't buy. Well, maybe only just . . .

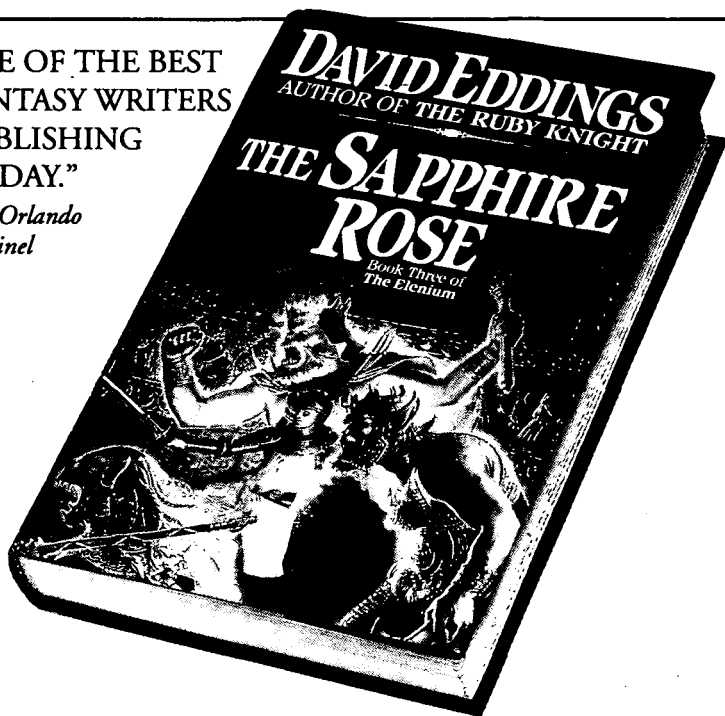
I picked my way across the damp underground parking ramp, unthinkingly ducking the concrete stalactites and shelves of glowing fungi. The elevator was in a good mood. Hello, Marius, it said, and took me straight to our flat without demanding an extra credit.

The flat was cool, gray, empty, softly humming to itself, smelling faintly of toast. As she often did, Meena had left our bedroom window running, ticking up the cost of the rental. It showed a scene from a

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tropical island, nostalgic waves beating the shore with a sound like an old-fashioned record in the run-out groove. I rummaged under the duvet for the remote control, but the flat beat me to it. The window snowed, then cleared to transparency. I stood looking out, feeling the cool, faint breath of reality. We were fairly high here, up on the eighth floor. I could see bruised clouds plowing over the estate, the lips mouthing silently on the billboard, the gray tangle of the city beyond.

Meena could never understand why I liked the daylight, Plain, muggy daylight. There was hardly enough of it to fill the room — but that was the point. It was faint, evanescent, dreamy. And anyway, what *did* she understand nowadays? I wandered over to her drawers. The top one was always a little stiff. You had to lift and then pull. Here she kept her jumpers and cardigans. Woolens, as — anachronistically — she liked to call them. Here was a Fair Isle, still almost new. I held it up, remembering a rare happy day, the three of us together. Little Robin in his bobble hat, laughing unsteadily as we swung him between us. Then I folded it back carefully, the way Meena had done.

The next drawer down was for her underwear. Everything was loose here, just stuffed in anyhow. In the cobweb shadows, my hands wandered through her things, feeling the poppers, the loose pull of elastic. I liked the specificity of underwear, the sense of secret purpose, that *this fits here* These days, it was the only time I felt close to Meena. When I was alone. Unlike the Meena-of-now, the vision I touched was pliable, loving. The drawer smelled of salt and linen, white memories of freshly crumpled sheets. It reminded me of times when the words came easily, when they didn't even matter.

I was about to close the drawer, when a glimmer of light caught my eye. Down in the tertiary layers of bras she no longer wore, knickers that were starting to wear through. Light. Bright daylight. And a small voice. It came from a corner of the drawer.

My fingers tangled under an old sachet of lavender, then closed on a piece of card. I lifted it out. The light shone on my hands and face. A photograph. It spoke to me.

“— don't —”

Meena, in some park.

“— don't —”

Turning toward the camera.

"— don't —"

A smile of surprise brightened her lips. Her hair a loose bun, strands of it clinging to her cheek. Blue sky. Dappled light from a whispering tree.

"— don't —"

Meena, endlessly turning toward the lens.

"— don't —"

I put the picture down. It went dark and silent for a moment, thinking that I'd gone away. But I had to pick it up, look at it again, hold it in my shaking hands.

"— don't —"

Don't. How could a negative word sound so loving?

Lin the tour guide came down to see us in her Jeep that evening, to check that we were settled in. Meena and I were sitting out on the veranda. The air smelled leafy, salty, earthy, wet. An hour before, there had been rain, flapping the palms, chattering in the gutters. We had been lying tangled in the damp sheets of our bed, too happy to move. Just in time, as the first heavy drops fell, the sensors in the windows had banged them shut. The sound of the rain pressed down on us. Smelling the sweet sudden change in the air, my fingers had traced the streaming shadows across Meena's skin.

"Hi!" Lin waved. She picked her way between the puddles and climbed the wooden veranda steps. "You like it here?"

We both smiled at the understatement. Out to sea, the sunset was under way. The clouds were fairy mountains.

Lin sat down, clipboard on her lap. Her bright blue sarong of the morning had been replaced with an equally brilliant red one. Despite the heat, she always managed to look clean and fresh. She asked us if we'd managed to work the bath and shower, found the food in the kitchen, explored the entertainment facilities. Of course, we had done none of these things, but we nodded and said everything was fine.

"Some people find the amnesia a problem."

Meena said, "I still feel like myself, if that's what you mean."

"That's exactly it." Lin smiled. "Some people don't."

Meena leaned forward in her rattan chair. In this twilight, against her white dress, her skin was incredibly brown. "We must have chosen to

come here, right?"

Lin tapped her clipboard. It glowed briefly, but she didn't glance down at it. "Meena, I don't have your particular details. That's deliberate, of course. Company policy. But I can tell you that it costs a great deal of money to come to this island. Not that everyone is a billionaire or anything. People win prizes; the Big Companies give out these holidays as performance incentives You might just have saved." She tapped the clipboard again. It threw shadows across her face. It was growing darker by the minute. "Whatever, make the most of it."

"But why would anyone want to forget everything?" Meena asked. "To leave themselves behind?"

"All sorts of reasons. Just think, you might both have demanding jobs or some other worry. What better way to forget all that?"

Meena nodded, although she didn't look entirely satisfied. Personally, I couldn't see what the problem was, as long as we were happy.

Lin stood up, but she obviously hadn't quite finished. "There are some specific advantages I can tell you about. The books, the music, the holo library, for example. You won't remember any of that. So you have a whole world to rediscover, if that's what you wish to do. There's a guy comes here every year for two weeks. He rereads the same book. It's new for him every time."

We watched Lin walk back toward her Jeep, her red sarong aflame in the twilight.

WE MADE love in our flat that night. Had sex, anyway. I turned over in bed to grab Meena, and Meena didn't push me away. I was self-absorbed, uncaring of her reaction: the photograph gave me a passion that I hadn't felt in years. Have you done this with him? I wondered, Your photographer friend? Or this? Meena was puzzled, although not uncooperative. But she insisted on keeping the bedroom window running. Moonlight. That bloody tropical shore. She used to say she liked the way it shone on our skin. Years before, I had found the habit arousing. Later on I decided it was narcissistic. Now I guessed that she simply wanted something interesting to watch while our lovemaking was going on.

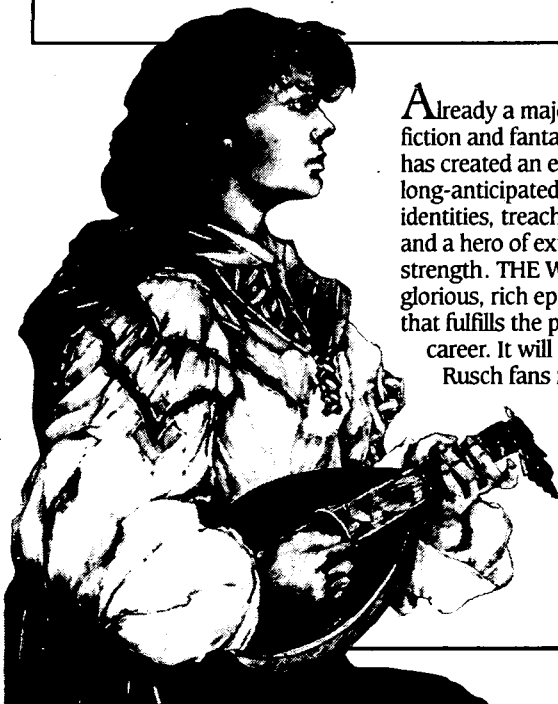
I didn't sleep well. I spent a lot of time gazing at Meena's face on the pillow. The waves in the window frothed irritatingly on moonlit sand. I



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couldn't find the remote control without turning on the light, and the flat itself got confused when Meena and I had conflicting views about something.

We used to make love anytime, all the time. Now it had to be in bed, at night, with the window running, a silly ritual that still often ended in a hundred different versions of "Not Tonight, Marius" anyway. Before we were married, before we had Robin, before work became more than just work, and money didn't matter, Meena always kept some piece of clothing on. One stocking, a necklace, a scarf. I remembered that she had a specially expensive scarf tucked down in one of those drawers, something I'd bought her one Christmas years ago, supposedly to wear in her hair, although we both knew what it was really for. It was night black, sprinkled with stars. It spread out and out, cool layers of darkness. I remembered kissing Meena through it. I remember feeling the salt sparkle of Aldebaran, Betelgeuse, the way she used to sigh from the back of her throat when she came.

People change; they drift apart. But how could we have lost so much? Don't. That smile. So much. Without even knowing. But I took comfort from that photograph in her drawer. I knew now that it wasn't just *me*, or even simply us.

After showering, changing, making love, we lit a fire from the white bones of driftwood we found on the beach. Looking up, the stars were everywhere. A crablike robot scuttled out from beneath the veranda and across the white sand to see to our needs. It even offered to light the fire, but that would have spoiled the fun. Instead, we sent it running obediently into the phosphorescent waves.

Meena brushed sand from her feet and sat cross-legged, watching me. "Marius and Meena," she said. "Don't you think it's strange, to have such odd names that match?"

"Everything about being here is strange," I said.

"Tell me what you remember."

I recited the names of the Big Companies, dates from history, venues for the Olympics. Meena chipped in, disagreeing over these little facts in the way that people always do. We both found that reassuring, to know that there was a real world out there, and that together we were part of it. It became a game. Capital cities, kings and queens. . . . Beyond the firelight

the dark wall of the jungle wailed and chattered.

The crab-robot returned from the sea out of a rising moon. It shook itself like a dog, then ran proudly up to us, a gleaming fish thrashing in each of its five claws. We both had an idea how to gut them, but we left the robot to get on with it, then rigged up a kind of spit from odds and ends in the well-stocked kitchen. We sat in the firelight and ate the meat with our fingers. It was steaming, pink, delicious.

Meena lay back on the sand. I took her hand and licked away the juice and fish scales, worked my way up her arm, parted the buttons of her dress to kiss her breasts. Inch by inch, I eased the cotton from her flesh. The fire crackled; the logs sighed into glowing dust. She had a scarf in her hair. I reached to loosen it and throw it away.

"No," she said. She sat up in the soft white sand to tie it above her knee. "I feel more naked if I keep something on."

"You remember that?" I said.

She lay back. "Yes," she said. She parted her legs. She took hold of me. "That I remember."

I didn't show Meena the photograph, nor mention it. I simply put it back in her knicker drawer where I had found it. Anyway, I'd stared at it for long enough to see it without looking. Meena turning, smiling. There, in my head. Don't. I didn't recall the scene — and I was sure I hadn't taken it — but I could tell that the photograph was a recent one from the soft lines around her eyes, from the slight hollowing of her cheeks, the things that age was starting to do to her. Just seeing it made me realize Meena hadn't smiled at me in that warm, open way in years. Warm, open. Not that way in years. Probably not since we had had Robin, when we were in love.

Meena came home midway through the evening, after I'd had time to get a little drunk. I grabbed hold of her in the narrow hall before she could push past, kissed her on the cheek, smelling her work clothes, feeling her work manner. My nerves were tingling. I was trying to detect some difference in her indifference, even though I knew that the only thing that had changed since the morning was me.

I watched her in the bedroom as she undressed.

"Good day?" She asked.

"Six sales," I said; I always added a few for luck. "You?"

"Nothing special. You didn't pick up Robin?"

"No," I said, feeling the usual pang of guilt.

"We must spend time with him at the weekend. Um, hold on." She hopped out of her tights. "I've arranged to see this client Saturday morning."

"Isn't that unusual?"

"Look, there's big money in this one, *darling*." She hated it when I queried anything about her work. She thought I didn't take it seriously enough. "He wants to drown in a vat of Malmsey."

"Happened to someone in Shakespeare."

"Marius, you can't expect these people to be original. They want some point of reference that they can talk about at the party. I'll have to lunch him, but I'll be back early in the afternoon. And then we get Robin out of stasis, right. Take him to the funfair, give the kid a treat."

She padded into the bathroom and told the flat to turn on the shower, successfully killing any further conversation.

I watched her through the streaming glass. The figure of a woman, no longer Meena. Like a painting by Seurat. A cipher, a stranger. Someone I might once have known.

She came out in a cloud of soapy steam, fumbling for a towel, strands of wet hair clinging to the intricate bones of her neck.

When I reached to touch her, she turned toward me.

"Don't," she said, vaguely annoyed.

A tropical morning. Meena asleep beside me. Sounds of the jungle through the open window beside our bed. I kissed her shoulder. She stirred and smiled, too beautiful to wake.

The white curtains swelled. A light breeze cooled my body. Beyond the window, palm trees swayed. The whole jungle was alive. Movement, color, light, a thousand different shades of shadow playing across the thick trunks of the palm trees, the dense labyrinth of ferns. A small monkey clung to the bark of the nearest tree. He swung up and along, hand over foot over hand, and hopped soundlessly onto the window ledge. He blinked. A tiny hand worried at his mouth. Everything about him was quick, shy, almost birdlike.

I eased myself up slowly from the bed, expecting the monkey to vanish at any moment. But he froze to watch me. Blink, blink. His irises were

silver, the pupils black as a camera lens. He was probably used to visitors — and he wanted food. I padded quickly to the kitchen. I rummaged for crackers or potato chips, but settled on the sultanas I found in a jar, which were probably more suitable anyway.

Meena was awake when I came back, leaning on her elbows and smiling at the monkey on the window ledge. A step at a time, I crept toward him. Meena slid out of bed behind me. The monkey crouched motionless, watching us approach. Meena and I sat down on the sun-warmed pine beneath the window, looking up at him. His tiny pelt was immaculate, lustrous brown, flecked gold where the light caught it. I held out a sultana. The hand took it in a blur. Then another. Meena held out a third. He ate each sultana fastidiously, nibbling around the edges, his eyes flicking from Meena to me, taking everything in. He had a scholarly face, our monkey. Sitting cross-legged beneath the window ledge like naked penitents, it was hard not to feel that Meena and I were in the presence of wisdom.

He didn't run off when the sultanas were finished. And I was sure now that he was gazing at us from curiosity rather than wariness or fear. The palm trees murmured. The warm air burnished the filaments of his fur, stirred Meena's hair. It was a strange moment of equality between one species and another. I felt that he knew us. From the wild serenity amid the treetops, he had come down to consider these strange, sleepy creatures. To see our flesh, our bones, our dreams.

I canceled my first appointment of the morning so that I could leave the flat after Meena. I was tired, a little dazed. I half-expected the photograph not to be there. But it was, and I tucked it into the flap of my briefcase.

The Volvo hummed and harred about what music to play me. It finally settled on "Martinu," an ethereal dance. Escape, the lips called after me from the billboard as we pulled out from the estate, looming over the rain-rotted villas. Escape. Treat yourself to the one luxury money can't buy. Well, maybe only just . . .

I visited my first prospect. After I'd done my usual spiel, he sat staring at the brochures I'd spread on the coffee table. He was old, with graveyard blotches on his hands, turkey wattles for cheeks. Almost old enough to be one of Meena's clients.

I'd played him this way and that, taken the objections and tossed them easily back. Of course, I agreed, security on your estate is excellent, but that has to be only the first barrier. Why, only yesterday there was that terrible thing on the news. Someone about your age. The kids from outside broke in when the electric fence shorted out, crucified the poor old guy for laughs on his kitchen table

The prospect risked a glance up at me. The loose flesh of his throat bobbed. Was he about to speak? But no, he looked down again. His trembling fingers brushed the cover of the Grade-A booklet. It was printed in red and deep green. They were Christmassy colors, the colors of apples and firelight, childhood and home. I knew, of course, that he ached for me to say something, to break the silence. But I could wait here all day, my friendly-but-serious expression locked into place.

I was good at my job. But then, is there an easier thing to sell than security? Who wants to be without that? I mean, it was important; I was doing these people a favor. I'd explained that to Meena often enough. And although she denied it, Meena was in sales, too — these days, who isn't? Our two jobs even followed on. After security, death. What could be more natural? And when the time comes and the surgeons can do no more, why not go out with a bang? Attend your own funeral. Jump from the top of the Eiffel Tower. Shoot yourself with an antique Luger that Hitler once owned.

At least, I thought, it's unlikely that Meena met the person who took that photograph through her work. But the idea clicked inside me. I saw trembling, age-stained hands clutching a camera. I saw it all. Someone with the greed and money to get everything they want. And Meena comes to arrange their last needs. A glimpse of her knees as she spreads her quotes and folders. And why not go out with a bang? Why not indeed.

"Have you ever thought about dying?" I asked my prospect, genuinely curious.

"What?" The withered face looked up at me, then firmed into an expression of refusal.

Dammit.

We had breakfast. I wandered around our house. One story, bare wood and big windows everywhere. Sunlight gleaming, and the smell of the sea. You almost felt as though you were out-of-doors. I paused at the entertain-

ment box, remembering what Lin had said. I skimmed through a few book titles. The famous ones rang a bell, but I had no idea whether I'd ever read any of them. I mean, who ever reads anything now anyway? Billionaires on tropical islands, maybe.

I asked the box to play me some music, just anything it thought I might like. I was curious to know how it would react, whether it had some idea of my taste in these things — which was more than I had.

The sound of a string quartet filled the room. Dvorák, the screen told me. The *American Quartet*. Opus 96. Beautiful stuff, and every note of it was new to me, as fresh as the day it had flowered in the mind of that émigré Czech stuck in some New York hotel. But at the same time, I felt a warmth toward the piece that I didn't associate with unfamiliar music — as much, that is, as I could associate anything with anything. Yes, I decided, this is a kind of memory, or at least a memory of a memory. It's how I feel when I look into Meena's eyes. Like the stranger you recognize without knowing.

At lunchtime I went out from the office to the repro shop opposite. There was a kid at the counter. He had acne, specks of blood on his suit collar. Don't, Meena said to him when he turned her over in his hands. He asked me whether I knew if it had been taken on a Canon or a Nikon. I told him, Just get the bloody thing done.

Home early, I put Meena's original photograph back in her knicker drawer with a feeling of relief. At least now that I had my own copy, I wouldn't have the indignity of constantly having to steal hers.

I sat down with the computer in the study, shoved the photograph into the drive.

"— don't —"

Meena turned to me on the screen. I zoomed in on her smiling face as she turned. Then over her shoulder. Some kind of path. Rainbowd at the edge of the shot where the lens was weakest and the digits were thin, I could just make out the wire of a litter bin. The bough over Meena's head was dipping in the breeze, freezing, dipping again. I worked my way through it leaf by leaf, saw flashes of blue sky, a caterpillar in close-up, then snatches of a glittering lake, and a old sign on the far shore. *BOATS FOR HIRE*, in peeling paint.

Meena said, — don't —"

I killed the sound of her voice, killed the picture, tumbled down a

stairway of menus to maximize the rest of the sound. The murmur of open air. Agitated birdsong. Trees whispering. It was a warm spring day. Somewhere, not too far off, I could hear splashes, shouts. The unmistakable sound of kiddies in a paddling pool. I saw orange water wings, the fanning blue water frozen forever.

I silenced the birds, the trees, the splashes, the shouts. Then there was the murmur that lies at the back of sound in any open space, like the grinding of a huge machine. I killed all of that, too. Turned up the volume. Listened to what was left.

Someone breathing. Whoever was holding the camera. Huh. Half an intake of breath. Huh.

Huh. The sound was amazingly light, almost feminine. But not quite. My suspicions had moved on from a geriatric to something with pectorals and sweat. Maybe I'd have to rethink again. Huh. It was over so quickly, so hard to tell. Huh. I tried to visualize the hands that held the camera, that touched Meena, that parted the secrets of her flesh.

"What the hell are you doing, Marius?"

Huh.

Meena stood at the door of the tiny study. In her work clothes, her work face, laptop in hand.

I turned, hit the Exit key. Huh. Do you really want to Quit? Huh. You bet.

I said, "Just pissing around."

"That strange noise . . . like someone crying." She shrugged. "Marius. Have you eaten?"

"No," I said. "I was about to ask you the same thing."

"You didn't pick Robin up?"

"Did you?"

Meena shook her head. "Marius, just how much time do you think I have these days?"

NEXT MORNING, after the monkey had come again to the window ledge, Meena and I found our yacht at anchor around the headland. In a pirate cove, the water so clear that the yacht seemed to hang suspended above the blue-pink coral.

We swam out toward her. As soon as we had climbed the rope ladder aboard, her ghostly crew set white sails to the fresh breeze.

We dropped anchor out in blue nowhere, alone to the rim of the horizon. We swam. The water here was impossibly deep, inky blue all the way down to dreams of pirate wrecks, the fallen marble of lost civilizations. Lying beside Meena on the gleaming deck, I wondered at the person I had been. In some gray city. This is the tomorrow that never comes, I thought, trailing my hand down Meena's belly, gently kissing her ear. This is the future.

"How do you think they made the island?" Meena asked later.

I was lying on her. Inside her. Breathing. The water was scudding at her shoulder. Brown flesh, brown wood, white foam. The yacht had filled her sails. The dolphins were leaping ahead of the prow. We were heading home.

"The beaches can't be natural," she said. "There are no beaches left since the ice caps melted."

I lowered my head to her shoulder, licked down into the hollow. Climate change. Yes, the fact was there in my mind. Climate. Change. But the gleam of brass, the scent of her hair. . . .

"It's an island," I said. "Adrift from all the change."

She chuckled. The sound came through my spine. "So you think it's floating?"

I kissed her. Don't all islands float, the proper islands that you dream about?

She raised her arms. Then she pushed me back, rolled over on the warm deck, was astride me, caressing herself against my face, the sky pushing through. I thought of the island, our magical floating island. Anchored, drifting on the shadowed deep-sea chains amid doublooned wrecks, the whispered bones of pirates.

Next afternoon, after five unsuccessful prospect calls and some more sleuthing on the computer, the Volvo took me to pick up Robin from the stasis center on my way to the park. I couldn't remember asking it to. Perhaps the car was developing a conscience. Maybe it enjoyed having its backseat thrown up over, little bits of broken toys wedged down between the upholstery. The Volvo parked in the plastic twilight beneath the stasis center's massive wigwam roof. Bright arrows beckoned me through the thickening smells of coffee and polyethylene toward Reception.

Day on day, Robin's stasis bill had mounted up like an old-fashioned

library fine. Even the receptionist seemed to think it was a lot. I gave her my card, and stood waiting for the red *Account Out of Credit* light to flash. But today whatever software god presided over the link to the bank was on my side. The receptionist dragged out a smile from the back recesses of her teeth. That'll do nicely.

When Meena and I had gone through the financial details necessary to have a Robin, the plan had been that she'd look after him most mornings; I'd have him afternoons. And unless we were going out, we would invariably let the little kid spend evenings in the flat, sleep with Mickey Mouse and Pluto in the little bedroom we'd had specially made. It all seemed fine when you looked at it on a spreadsheet. Stasis wasn't that much cheaper than using a nursery, but the big advantage was that Junior experienced no elapsed time. Mommy or Daddy dropped you into the stasis center in the morning. Five seconds later they picked you up again. It could be five hours or — increasingly with us — five days. Still, there were no nannies, no "Well, Sarah Says I Can," nothing to conflict with the parent's role. Robin was all ours — but the way things had worked out, we had to keep him mostly in stasis so that we could earn the money to keep him there.

Robin ran out to greet me. He gave me a hug.

"What day is it now, Daddy?" he asked. That's one thing they don't tell you about in the brochures. Kids aren't stupid.

"Wednesday all day," I said. "And Daddy's going to take you to a park."

Robin was silent in the Volvo. Gazing out of the window at the sunless city, gazing at me.

"You'll be starting school soon," I was saying. "You'll have other kids to play with."

"Yeah," he said.

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel, pretending to be absorbed in a process I wasn't even performing. We drove in hushed silence. I wished the Volvo would play one of its kiddie tunes. "The Little Red Train." Or the one that went "Scoop, Scoop" at the end of every verse. But the car didn't seem to think that music of any kind was appropriate, and Robin would be sure to notice if I did it manually. Green eyes under a blond fringe watched me, the movement of my hands, the expression on my face. Blink, blink. Click, click. Meena had had Robin seven years before. He was now three and, oh . . . ten months, but I couldn't help

wondering whether the wisdom of those extra years hadn't somehow seeped in.

It was billed as autumn in the park. A big red sign flashed over the broken concrete outside the dome, endlessly scattering a neon tumble of falling leaves. It cost a fortune to get in. You got a free Nikon if you paid an extra 10 percent. Throw away the camera, keep the pics.

There was a guy standing at the wicker gate that led into the smoky twilight. I'd seen him and his sort many times before. At the funfair, the big Toys R Us that Robin was always wanting to go to, even outside the stasis center. Quick as a pickpocket in reverse, he tucked a card into my hand. Sweet kid you have there, the card whispered. Got a list of prospective parents as long as your arm. Give a good price, and no fancy paperwork, no questions asked. I tore the card up and threw it into the nearest bin.

Dead leaves clattered on the paths. The low sky trailed through withered trees. The ice cream stall was boarded and bolted.

"Do you like it here?" I asked Robin, crouching down to help him on with the mittens that hung from elasticized straps.

"It's good," he said, breathing a little gray cloud at me.

"Have you ever been here before?"

"I don't know" he said. "Have you taken me?"

We walked across the damp grass to the swings. I pushed him slowly. The wet chains creaked. Ahead of us the paddling pool had been drained. A bowl of flaking blue concrete, filled with leaves and the sludge of autumn. I remembered the children's voices, the water wings, the bright spray.

"I thought Mommy might have come here with you once," I said. "In the spring."

It would look different then?"

"Yes. All the birds would be singing. The sun shining. I thought Mommy might have taken you, perhaps with a nice uncle."

"A nice uncle?"

"You know, a grown-up friend."

Robin tilted his head back from the swing to smile at me. He seemed to think it was some kind of joke.

"Come on," I said.

A gardener was tending a bonfire beside the damp greenhouses, raking

the endless fall of leaves into a wheelbarrow, tipping them over the flames to produce more smoke. Robin and I walked over to him.

"Autumn's a popular season," he told us. "You'd think people would want sunshine, but they seem to like this melancholy place."

"What about spring?"

"That doesn't go down so well," he said. There was a dewdrop on his nose. It looked authentic, but as he raised his arm to wipe it on his ragged sleeve, I heard the faint whir of a faulty servo. Not snot, I supposed, but machine oil.

"But you do do spring?"

The smoke spiraled into his face. He didn't blink.

"Spring? Oh yes. A week or so every couple of years."

"And when was the last time?"

He shrugged. "You'll have to speak to the mainframe about that. I don't have a long-term memory. I'm just a gardener, you know." The dewdrop was growing on his nose again: it made you want to sniff.

Robin got bored as we walked along the aimless paths, around the boating lake. The boats were locked up for the winter. The sign above the boathouse said *BOATS FOR HIRE*. Coming closer, I could see that the peeling paint was actually carefully molded plastic. I gazed across the black water of the lake. I checked the copy of the picture in my pocket.

"— don't —"

Robin looked up, surprised to hear his Mommy's voice. I shrugged, patted his head. This is grown-up business, Son. Meena turned and smiled. She said, Don't.

I found the spot. Inevitably, it was a disappointment. Here in a different season, with minty smell of decay and the wind rattling the litter baskets. I gazed down at the picture again. Turning, smiling, saying, Don't. There, in sunlight, she looked happy and more real.

Robin was busy clambering up onto the park bench beside me. He was a little unsteady as he stood up. I lifted him in my arms, surprised at his lightness, his weight.

"Will you take me home?" he asked, looking me right in the eye.

I gave Robin a kiss at the stasis center, ruffled his hair before he scampered off through the sliding doors. I waved. Back at the weekend, I promised. A different woman at Reception smiled. Perhaps I should follow Robin through those sliding doors. Thirty years from now, I could return

to Meena, see the sags and wrinkles she couldn't afford to put right. Know her for just what she was, laugh freely in her aged face. But the thought was only a game. Although there was nothing to stop those who could afford it from going into long-term stasis, everyone knew from the bitter experience of the past hundred years that the future was a joke. The only guarantees were that the climate would be worse, and that everything apart from wristwatches, computers, and disposable umbrellas would be more expensive.

When I got back into the estate, I saw that the lips had gone from the billboard. There was a picture there now. A tropical beach. But the voice was still there. Escape, it whispered. Treat yourself to the one luxury that money can't buy. Invisibly, the lips smiled. Well, maybe only just Escape. Beckoning palms, white sand. Escape. There, in the car, I couldn't help laughing. The Volvo innocently played me a little Dvorák, thinking I was happy.

Meena and I often talked about who we might be. Do you feel like a billionaire? Well, no, neither do I. If one of us was rich, it was probably Meena, we decided. She was more decisive; I was more romantic. We were noticing things about ourselves as much as about each other. The whole idea of this process of discovery was charmingly odd. How Meena liked some time alone walking on the beach each afternoon, my interest in the music the entertainment box provided. The foods we liked, the things we hated, the way we made love.

And were we in love? There was a sense of delicious honesty, sitting out on the rattan chairs with the palm trees dripping and the sea still gray after the afternoon rain, talking about ourselves as though we were other people. The things that we surprised each other with came as much a surprise to ourselves.

Yes, we agreed, holding hands as the sun came out and the jungle began to steam. This is a kind of love, a unique childhood innocence, the love you first feel for someone. When you really don't know them. When you ache with the specialness, the closeness, the new sharing. I mean, whoever said that love was about knowledge? And we vowed that we would remember this time, carry it with us like a jewel through whatever lay ahead.

Meena and I ran to the sea before dinner. We made love in the white

bridal foam. Then Meena swam toward the sinking sun. She stood up and waved, then cried out as her foot struck something.

I helped her hop back to the bungalow. It was a deep, clean gash in the sole of her right foot. She must have caught the edge of a block of coral that the waves had washed in. She sat patiently as blood and seawater trickled over the veranda. Our little monkey ran out along the wooden rail. We had to smile when he saw Meena and pawed his face, chattering with what sounded like concern.

I called for Lin. You'd think they'd see to this sort of thing, I thought irritably, thumping the digits on the box. With the money we must be paying. But she arrived amazingly quickly. This time her sarong was green, shot through with golden yellow. She sprayed Meena's foot with something from the bag she was carrying.

"It'll need stitches," she said. Meena leaned forward to watch with curiosity when Lin got to work with needle and thread, as though it were someone else's foot.

Lin dropped the needle. It fell between a gap in the veranda boards. Lin sighed, then sat back and took a blade from her bag. She used it to cut open both of her wrists, then grasped the dry flaps and peeled the skin away from each hand. Beneath, there was clean steel.

"It'll be a lot quicker this way," she said, snipping her fingers like scissors.

When Lin had sprayed on Meena's bandage, she pulled the skin back onto her hands, smoothing out the wrinkles.

"It's so much easier to hold things, metal to metal," she said, smiling, looking cool and beautiful in her sarong. "I really don't know how you humans manage."

I found out about spring in the park. The last time they'd run it had been two months before. A special promotion, linked in with a new fashion design. Spring Is For Lovers . . . Of Style. Well, how ironic. I asked the park mainframe if it kept a list of visitors. Hauling out some ancient privacy program from the depths of its memory, it told me to bugger off.

So I started to follow Meena. I hadn't made a sale all week anyway, and was running out of fresh prospects. I'd lost the edge. It's a hard life, being in sales — everyone's at it. It's the only job left now that the machines see to all the important stuff.

The Volvo enjoyed tailing Meena's Casio. It took to playing Mahler. One minute the music was yearning; the next, crashingly ironic. I couldn't decide whether I liked it or not.

Meena went to predeath receptions. She attended performance reviews at Head Office. She visited clients. I sat in the Volvo under sick skies, watching from a discreet distance amid the rubble and the chattering billboards, the tightly fenced estates. Mahler rumbled on, symphony after symphony. I gazed at my copy of the photograph, propped on the steering wheel. Meena. Turning. Smiling. Don't. The clients Meena saw had money, big houses. After she'd ducked back into the Casio and driven off through the rain, I had ten or so minutes to check at the door before the Volvo lost contact. Dingdong, nice place you've got here, sir. And when was the last time you thought about security? But they were all old, old. I could tell that all they truly were interested in was dying. So, for the hell of it, I started trying to sell that to them instead. And the joke was that they were all interested. Sure, Meena was busy seeing a lot of prospects, but sure as death itself, she wasn't closing her sales.

Meena crisscrossed the city in her Casio. Apart from wildly exaggerating her success rate, she did exactly what she told me she did when I quizzed her each evening. I thought, So this is your life, Meena. Another prospect, another meeting. And just exactly when is it that you smile?

I couldn't sleep that night. This island, the false beach, Lin a robot. . . .

The moonlight fell brightly through the window nearest our bed. The jungle beyond was black, white. The trunk of the nearest palm was gashed by shadows, like the claw marks of some huge animal. And clinging to it with tiny hands, motionless, precise, was our little monkey. Gazing through our window, watching us with his gleaming eyes.

At dawn, with Meena still sleeping, I took a bucket and walked along the shore until I found a scatter of rock pools. The morning light was still incomplete, misty gray. I fished for little crabs amid the anemones, dropped them into my bucket, where they clambered over each other's backs like the celebrants of an orgy. When I'd collected a dozen or so, I squatted over a wide, flat rock, tendrils of the waves running between my toes. I broke the shells open one by one. The first three crabs were pink inside, smelling of flesh and salt. But the fourth tried to scuttle away, trailing a silver necklace of circuits. I hit it again. It gave off a thin wisp of

smoke, and was still.

When Meena awoke, and after we had made love, we took the Jeep for a picnic in the jungle. It found us a waterfall, a clear pool to dive in. Shining rocks, drifting clouds, and rainbows. Far above, impassive as a god, the great mountain at the center of the island was half-veiled in cloud. As we sat like savages in the humid shade, eating with our fingers and drinking chilled wine from the bottle, we wondered if you could really touch the sky from up there. We planned an expedition to find out one day before the holiday ended, knowing that time was already growing shorter, knowing that we never would.

"Look!" Meena pointed as we climbed back into the Jeep. "Up there." I gazed up into the green canopy.

"Can you see?"

I nodded. And after a few moments, I could.

"Our monkey," she said.

He was looking down at us from a thick vine. Those wise eyes.

"That's not possible," I said shaking my head.

SO I arranged a party. I invited all our friends. Meena said, But you hate parties. I insisted. I fixed the catering, bought the booze with money we didn't have. I wanted everyone here, everyone that she knew.

I was drunk before the guests arrived. It was a strange feeling, wandering, smiling, saying Hello, knowing that one of these people was probably The One. That here in my flat at this very moment, drinking my wine and tracing the circles of dust, were The Hands That Touched, The Lips That Kissed. The room swayed; the flat was having a good old time crammed with all these bodies, playing rock and roll. I watched Meena as she squeezed her way from group to group; I looked for those secret signs: the smiles, the brush of fingers, plain avoidance.

But there was nothing. I'd made a fool of myself. I went to throw up. I was swaying against the pull of the room. People were looking my way. I staggered into the cool of Robin's bedroom, slumped down on his tiny bed. Over the music, I yelled at the flat to close the bloody door. Then I lay back in the linen darkness. Mickey Mouse looked down at me, smiling.

Meena came in. She had left the door open, and there was silence outside. The party had ended, and the air was stale yellow from all the

drink and the talk. I must have slept.

"What the hell is the matter with you, Marius?"

"Too much to drink."

"I don't mean that."

"Do you love me?"

"Look," she said. "I've got a busy day tomorrow. A new customer wants to suffocate in a vat of Venusian atmosphere, something original and expensive for a change."

"You used to wear things when we made love. Said it made you feel more naked."

"You should have some water, take a paintab."

"What's gone wrong with us?"

"This isn't really the time to talk, is it?"

"Are you seeing someone else?"

She gazed down at me. I could hear the dark silence of Robin's little room hissing the word *Yes*.

"Meena, are you?"

"Am I what?"

Seeing someone else?"

"No," she said. "Yes. Make up your own answer."

"I need to know the truth."

"What difference would that make? You can't imagine what it's like, Marius, living with you."

"We used to be happy."

"Yeah," she said. "We used to be happy."

She turned away.

"No, wait!" I shouted. My voice made the room spin.

She folded her arms. "What exactly is it that you want, Marius?"

"I found . . . there's a photograph of you, in a park. Turning and smiling. You look so happy. I found it in your second drawer."

"My drawer. How fucking typical."

"Meena!"

The flat slammed Robin's door behind her.

On another day we went into town. The flying boat had just landed—more new arrivals, with people waiting for them on the quay. The lips on the big billboard breathed *Welcome* across the bay. Feeling vaguely

envious, Meena and I stood and watched for a moment, then wandered on through the narrow streets. There were little shops everywhere, wind chimes and mementos drooping outside in the brilliant heat, interiors that reeked of mystery and leather and donkey dung. Of course, there were other tourists here, walking arm in arm, all deeply tanned, deeply in love. It spoiled things somewhat, to see your own feelings mirrored so easily in others. People visit the town here only late in their holidays, an ancient shopkeeper told us after we'd bargained for a soapstone box. When the novelty starts to wear off, he added. I looked at him sharply. Wet eyes, a slack, toothless mouth. Would the tour company ever program a robot to say something like that? I could even smell his breath. No, I decided. No.

We sat and took coffee in a white colonial square, resting, assessing our purchases, knowing that everything else would soon be a memory. We felt we'd bought wisely with our money. Not that our cash told us anything about what we could normally afford; every visitor to the island was allocated the same amount.

After a while a couple sat down with us at the tin table. They were both blond, handsome. I wondered if Meena and I could possibly give off the same scent of easy money. And I vaguely resented their intrusion — I was starting to count the remaining hours of our stay together — but they proved to be friendly, amusing. Of course, conversation was limited by our lack of memory, but that proved to be a surprising advantage. There was little scope for backbiting, point scoring. It was an egalitarian society here on the island — everyone could pretend to be a billionaire with reasonable conviction. So we laughed and joked together, fantasized outrageously about our real lives, wandered around more of the shops, watched the natives at work along the harbor until another marvelous tropical sunset began to tear the sky to glowing shreds.

A headache woke me in the morning. I was still dressed, crammed into Robin's cot with Mickey Mouse leering down at me. I hauled myself out and leaned against the window. This one was clear; we hadn't been able to afford the special glass for Robin's room. Not that I was complaining. As far as it was possible to make out from the dismal sky, the sun had been up for some hours. And the flat sounded quiet, empty. Meena had probably left hours ago. No chance of following her today.

I rubbed at my face, probed the weary bags under my eyes. Oh Meena, Meena. Why can't we just fall back into love? Down on the estate, the lips were back on the poster. They seemed to smile specifically at me through a black flurry of rain. Escape. Treat yourself to the one luxury that money can't buy. Well, maybe only just. . . Yeah, I grinned back. If only.

I padded around at Robin's tidy little room. All the toys put away, no fingerprints or crayon marks on the walls, no Playdough sticking to the carpet. The poor kid; he was hardly real, hardly here at all. And whose fault was that? I wondered. Whose fault was that? I picked up Teddy from on top of the wardrobe. He grinned at me and said, "Hello, little fella; want to play?" I put him back down. He slumped, looking disappointed.

I opened Robin's top drawer. His tiny clothes. Red dungarees, white socks, blue mittens. Just like Meena, he felt more real to me this way. No sulks; no moaning, "Daddy, Daddy"; no wanting stuff we could never afford, making us feel like inadequate parents. Not that he was a bad kid, but still. A couple of drawers below, I found some of his baby things. I held up a romper suit, still stained around the front from some battle in the high chair. Jesus, had he ever been *that* small? As I moved to put it back, I heard a voice. I glared at the teddy bear to shut up, thinking for a moment that it was him.

"— hey Mo —"

But it was Robin's voice. I looked down into the drawer. Beneath an old bib, I saw daylight, some photographs held together by an elastic band.

"— watch m —"

A park in spring. A tree nodding. Robin by a bench. Then Robin climbing onto it.

"— careful dar —" Meena's happy voice behind the camera.

Robin standing on the bench, giggling. One shot of him from the other side of the path; then another, much closer.

"— let me —" Robin's hand reaching out toward the lens, the fingers huge, unfocused.

Then a shot of the gravel. The dancing spring shadows of the trees. Meena's voice saying:

"— e careful —"

"— now —"

The last shot had drifted somewhere else, got lost in another drawer

the way these things always do. But Meena said, Don't. I didn't need the photograph to hear her voice.

The palms were swaying wildly against the moon when the Jeep took us back from town. But there was little wind — we had spent the evening dancing in a lamplit square, and we were both very merry, very drunk.

We stumbled around the bedroom in the bungalow, falling over our clothes as we tried to get out of them.

"Today's the last but one," Meena said with sudden clarity.

I flopped onto the bed to watch the ceiling revolve.

"It'll be your turn to leave first," Meena added, her voice fading off into the bathroom. "Seeing as you arrived here before me."

I heard the shower running. When she came back out, drying her hair, the room was still spinning. I pretended that I was asleep.

She turned off the light, shuffled and grunted, then started to breathe heavily, her bottom sticking out into my side of the bed. I could see the darkness of the jungle out of the window. It all looked pretty safe. No mosquitoes, no snakes, no spiders. And even if there were any such beasts, they would be charming and eccentric. User-friendly.

There on the shadow-slashed trunk of the nearest tree, the wise-faced monkey gazed down at me. Eventually I had to get up and close the curtains.

ESCAPE. THE lips smiled at me. Treat yourself to the one luxury that money can't buy. I drove in silence. For once, the Volvo was lost for an appropriate tune. When the automatic gates from the estate failed to open, I had to get out and do it manually, battling my way through a sleet of soot and litter. Escape. The voice was loud on the wind. Marius, it called after me. Marius. I climbed back inside, and the Volvo slammed the door, getting my mood right for a change. Marius. Marius. Don't. I froze. But no, it was just the wind, just my imagination.

Jealousy, I decided, was like one of the pure states of the soul that the mystics used to strive for. All-encompassing, it lit your every thought. Like moving underwater, or through another world, things had a different life. I realized that — for a while, at least — the photograph had given my life meaning. It had helped me remember the Meena I had loved. She had twirled ahead of me on this pointless trail, flowing in bright ribbons of

memory, beautiful and strange as a temple dancer. Meena, my smiling Meena. The Meena that existed only in my head. Somehow she had led the way.

Robin ran out toward me through the sliding doors at the stasis center. I scooped him up, gave him a hug.

He asked, "What day is it, Daddy?" He smelled like the place itself, of coffee and polyethylene.

I had to think. Yes, Wednesday. Another Wednesday. Seemed that poor Robin's life was a succession of Wednesdays. Face facts; we weren't good enough for him.

"Let's go to the park," I said, taking his hand. "There's a man there I want you to meet. Or, if he's not there, we could go look for him at Toys R Us."

Robin stared at me, mittens swinging on their elastic on the ends of his sleeves. Blink, blink. Click, click. He asked, "Was that the man at the gate, Daddy, the one who gave you the talking card?"

I managed a smile. A sweet, bright kid. Was there anything he didn't notice?

Our last full day together on the island went quickly. The sun was as bright as ever, the beach as white, the sea as warm. But everything was pervaded with the cool melancholy that comes like a wind from nowhere on these occasions. We had planned on going out again on our yacht, but when we walked to the little cove, we found that it had gone, presumably reallocated to one of the new arrivals. With that discovery came the awkward thought that perhaps we hadn't been able to afford to keep a yacht for the whole of our holiday, and also of the days that it had been floating unused in the clear water, muttering sea chanteys to its ghostly crew, clocking up a bill that we would perhaps struggle to pay.

Lin came around in the afternoon. Now that I knew the truth, everything about her seemed artificial. Her smiles, her sarongs. And when she went inside our bungalow, I couldn't help thinking that she was simply checking that we hadn't broken anything. She asked about Meena's foot. She asked if we'd had a good time. I sat on the veranda, listening to the sea, hardly bothering to answer. And that night on the beach, we sent the crab-robot into the sea and lit a fire just as we had done on the first night. But the fish was bony and ill-cooked, and afterward even

Meena didn't taste the same.

Crab-robots were dismantling the billboard when I drove back to the flat, crawling over the silent lips like ants on a corpse. I had the tickets to the island lying on the passenger seat, so I guessed the lips had served their purpose, managed at least one sale. Everyone's at it nowadays, selling things — even the machines. And soon they'll be better than we are, and what the hell are we all going to do then?

Through the dripping parking ramp, the elevator wanted a bribe to take me up. In an expansive mood, I gave it what it asked for without haggling. The flat smelled of toast and damp daylight, cheap wine still from the party, cheap living, cheap lives. There was a sound coming from the bedroom. Someone was groaning, going, Uh, uh, uh.

I stood in the narrow hall, my heart racing, the tickets going damp in my hands. Meena's voice. Uh, uh. From the bedroom. I felt vindicated — wronged — but at the same time, my mind was a blank. Step-by-step, a million miles at a time, I walked toward the half-open door.

Meena was lying on the bed under the light of a tropical moon, tangled in her work clothes, her glowing laptop thrown open beside her. She raised her face and looked up at me through streaming tears.

"I thought," I said. My shoulders slumped. "I don't know. I just thought."

"You know what they've gone and done, don't you?" she said.

I stared at her. She was fumbling under her pillow, searching for a tissue, trying to sniff back the tears, embarrassed to be seen this way, even by me, her husband.

"They've given me the sack." She blew her nose. "Say my performance has dropped below . . . below an acceptable level." The tropical moon settled in the pool in each of her eyes. Now, where the hell does that leave us — you tell me that, Marius? You tell me that."

I sat down beside her. I took her hand. My movements were slow and solid. I felt heavy with control.

"It's all right, my darling," I told her.

She looked at me, wanting me to take over, to take care. Her whole face was shining, washed clean. Like an old-fashioned street after some old-fashioned rain, like something from the past.

She began to sob deeply again when I showed her the tickets, and even more so when I told her what I had done. But I sat patiently, gazing at her

in the light of a tropical moon, listening to the sound of waves. My Meena. I held her hand. My Meena. She trembled to my touch, but she didn't push me away. I kissed her face, and she tasted like the waves of a warm tropical sea laddered by moonlight. Then I told the flat to blank the window, and for once the flat didn't argue, and it was just the two of us and the darkness and the faint humming that lies at the background of everything, like the turning of a huge machine. My Meena. My heart was thick and slow with gratitude, control, love. My Meena. I took her in my arms, knowing at last that she understood.

Meena was up early on the final morning, putting all her lovely clothes back into their case. It had been so hot — and we'd been so much in love — that she'd had little chance to wear many of them. Would we be able to keep them? I wondered, watching. When we get back, will we care?

"What are you going to do this afternoon?" I asked Meena after I'd packed my own things. "When you're alone after my flying boat has gone."

"It's only a few hours' wait, isn't it?" she said, pulling out her drawers to check they were empty. "I'll just wander around the town. I mean, Marius, what did you do on the first day?"

I shrugged. Quite honestly, I couldn't remember. Inevitably, and for all the lovely charade at the harbor, you seemed to drift to and away from this island rather than reach it with the solid bump of one moment.

"It's a nice idea, though, isn't it?" Meena said, holding up a final blouse. "Arriving and leaving on different flying boats. Makes everything happier and sadder. . . . Look at this." She fished something from the silk pocket, the photograph she'd found in her case on that very first day. "I'd quite forgotten."

I nodded. So had I — but now I was standing at the bedroom door. I hated hanging around like this, protracted good-byes. Although there was still plenty of time, I wanted us to leave the bungalow now, get into the jeep and away.

She held the photograph up to her face. The light from it had a different quality. It was softer, bluer. Her voice said, "— don't —"

"I wonder how this got here?" she said. "It's hard to imagine that it was purely an accident. Perhaps it's some kind of message."

"— don't —"

"Yes," I said. "More likely, we'll never know."

"Well, I'll just wander along the beach for a while. Say my good-byes." Meena clicked the catches on her case. "There's plenty of time yet. You don't mind waiting here, darling, do you?"

She had wandered off down the steps of the veranda toward the sea before I had time to compose a reply.

The bedroom seemed to close and darken behind her. Ready now for someone else, it shrugged off our traces so easily.

Hearing a sound on the window ledge, I turned. The monkey, sitting there. Somehow he'd grabbed hold of Meena's photograph and was studying it. The strange sunlight shone on his wise, nervous face. "— don't —," Meena said. Don't. He just stared. Blink, blink. Click, click. He put the photograph to his mouth, nibbled cautiously at the plastic the way any real monkey would have done. Then he looked at me. A challenging stare, filled with smug knowledge.

Feeling sudden anger, I ran over to him. The monkey was slow, conditioned by our affection and sultanas. I grabbed a thin arm. He was light. He didn't struggle, but went stiff with fear — or, more likely, was conserving battery power for a sudden burst of speed.

Right. I spread-eagled him with my hands on the pine floor. Right. I was sick of being watched, analyzed. The silver eyes blinked. I stared into them, seeing through and down to a control room somewhere, guys in greasy vests with their feet up, sipping preform cups as they watched the screens, saying, Hey, will you just see that lady. Right. I looked around for something hard, sharp. But the bedroom was clear and empty. I grabbed the monkey roughly by the neck, hauled it into the kitchen. The floor pattered behind me, a watery trail of ordure. Yeah, I thought, how realistic, picturing the guy in the vest at the far end of the link, hitting the appropriate button.

I held the monkey down on the cutting board and reached for the nearest thing on the antique rack. Which turned out to be a meat tenderizer. Through the window, there was blue sea, palm trees, lacy waves. The monkey still wasn't putting up a fight, which I found somehow disappointing. He just stared up at me, his tiny mouth half-bared, showing his tiny teeth, his helpless pink tongue. I released my grip slightly, daring him to try to nip me. The monkey just shivered, stared at me with those old, wise eyes.

I let go, wondering if this was a demonstration of mercy or a simple

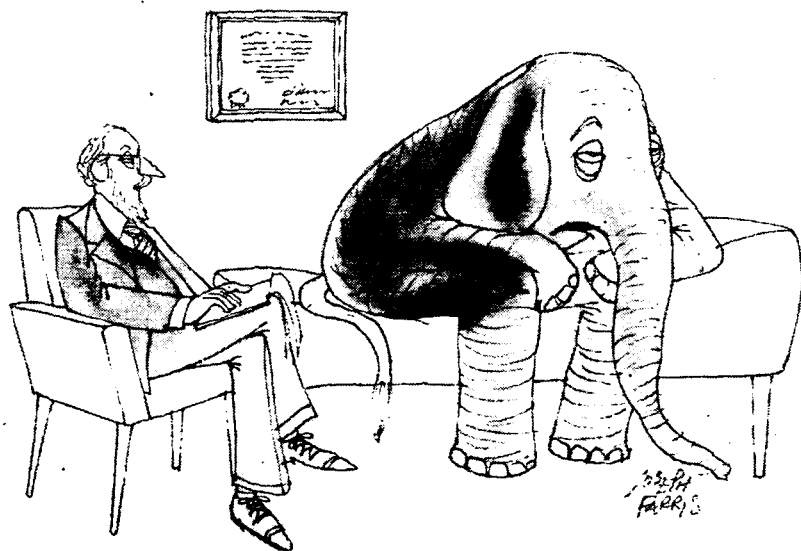
failure of nerve. The monkey pulled himself up and stared, squatting on the work surface. He gave a shrill chatter and rubbed at his face. Then he looked hopefully up at the jar of sultanas. I had to smile, but when I reached for them, he started, jumped down, and sprinted from the kitchen, through the bedroom door, up out of the window, blurring into the green shadows beyond.

I stood for a while at the window, but there was nothing to see but the tangled beauty of the jungle. Turning back to the bedroom, I saw the photograph of Meena lying on the pine floor. I picked her up. She turned toward me and smiled.

"— don't —"

I smiled back, then tucked the photograph into my back pocket. My Meena. A memory. A odd kind of memento of this odd, happy holiday.

I got the crab-robot to clear up the mess the monkey had left, then carried our cases out to the Jeep. Sitting down on them, I gazed around at Heaven for the last time. There was no sign of the monkey, but, through the gently nodding palms, I could see the white speck of the flying boat as it turned along the island, preparing to touch down. Listening to the faint and somehow reassuring hum of its engines, I sat and waited for my Meena to return along the shore.



"It's embarrassing. I can't seem to remember anything . . . short-term or long-term!"

Vance Aandahl is a familiar name to F&SF readers. For over thirty years, he has been a regular contributor to this magazine. His short fiction has appeared in a wide variety of publications from slicks such as Playboy to literary quarterlies such as New World Writing. He teaches writing and science fiction literature in Denver. "Pinched" is an odd little tale that defies definition. Half humorous, half horrifying, "Pinched" examines the things that make us human.

PINCHED

By Vance Aandahl

SHADOWS. SHADOWS WITH-
in shadows. The shadow of his
fist poised to knock on the
door, the shadow of his soul, a shadow shaped like the claw of a crab. And
something else: the smell of replicator waste, a mild fragrance reminiscent
of freshly cut eggplant — call it ambience of nucleic acid

The Tallgirl's fusers squealed to a halt, and the bulkhead finally stopped vibrating against the back of Hartley's head. It was still nightmare black in the hold, but now that his skull wasn't being tattooed, he could hear clearly the mutterings and curses and sick moans of the other convicts packed tightly around him. He felt crushed by the obscene pressure of their naked male flesh, crushed by the ovenlike heat and the suffocating atmosphere, a humid shroud of carbon dioxide mixed with the stench of the excrement that had piled up on the floor of the compartment during their voyage.

Light blasted Hartley's eyes, followed by an outcry of shouts and shrieks. The mass of naked bodies shifted in his direction, smashing him against the bulkhead. Everyone was yelling. His ears ached with the noise. He realized the light was coming not from the overhead hatch, but from the other side of the hold. Suddenly the weight against him diminished, just enough so he could squirm around and move his arms. He stood on his toes and craned his neck to see what was happening, but he was too short. A metal ring hung from the bulkhead above him. He jumped and grabbed it, then pulled himself up so he could look over the sea of shaved heads.

A section of the side of the ship had swung open like a gate, and the jammed-together prisoners were shoving those closest to the opening through it to fall into the water below. As the men who remained gained elbowroom, the discharge slowed.

Screams rose from the unseen ocean. What was happening to those who'd been ejected and fallen?

Brighter light illuminated the hold. Looking up, Hartley saw the overhead hatch lifting.

"Move it, move it, *move it!*" boomed a brutal voice from above. "Faster, you stupid bastards!"

The convicts still in the hold reversed direction, struggling away from the exit hole. Hartley pulled himself higher on the ring, but the backsurge of bodies pinned his legs and butt against the bulkhead with so much pressure that the bolt strips on the metal plates felt like they were cutting into his flesh.

My molecules move, he thought; my molecules flow. . . . I'm not the same now as a moment ago. . . .

The pressure was excruciating, but Hartley resisted the temptation to say the words aloud. It wasn't time yet. He just gritted his teeth and held on to the ring.

"All right, you assholes, you asked for it!"

From the hatchway above, half a dozen jets of water shot thunderously down at the men on Hartley's side of the hold. Salt spray doused his face, blinding him. The weight dispersed, and his legs were released. Drenched by the sidesplash, he clung desperately to the ring. Something knocked him loose, and he tumbled into the flood of flesh and water. He grabbed at

someone and tried to pull himself to his feet. In a maelstrom of flailing limbs, his head took a blow, and he fell again. Pain pinwheeled through his skull. Floundering on his back, choking on gulps of water, he concentrated on not blacking out. Someone stepped on his stomach. He rolled onto his side and shrank into a fetal ball. The crash and roar of the hoses and the shouts of his shipmates sounded in his ears like Pandemonium itself. Sobbing, half-drowned, he strove to stand, but something struck him down again. He was being swirled round and round, then swept from side to side, driven back and forth across the floor by the zigzag cross fire of the hoses. He felt himself bump over an edge and plummet into the brilliant eye of the sun, and as he cartwheeled in midair, he caught a blurred, upside-down glimpse of other bodies falling with him in a sparkling cascade of water droplets.

And then the plunge, the cold, the shock of being immersed in a different and unbreathable world. Hartley tucked and twisted, groping blindly with his hands. Which way was up? Someone plunged past, striking him in the shoulder. He fought not to inhale. He opened his eyes and saw the light rushing toward him. His head hit the surface with an explosion of spray, and he gasped for air.

All around him, men were thrashing awkwardly to stay afloat, screaming in pain or crying for help. Were there sharks? Hartley's bowels went icy loose, and his arms and legs tried to retreat into his body. Then he realized. It wasn't sharks. These men around him were the ones who'd never learned how to swim, plus maybe some others who'd broken bones falling on each other during the first violent blowout of bodies.

The *Tallgirl* loomed over them. Looking up, Hartley saw the hole in her hull disappear as the gate-plate swung back into place. Bobbing around, he looked in the opposite direction and saw the island.

The men who could swim were churning en masse toward the island. Hartley followed them, anxious to escape the desperate pleas and grasping fingers of those doomed to drown. He swam a few hundred feet, then stopped, treading in place, turtle-stretching his neck to get a better view.

The island lay like a scab on the surface of the ocean. From this distance, it looked tiny, a flat brown strip of sand or rock, a gravel bar. How could it be so small? For security reasons the Federal Bureau of Corrections refused to disclose the island's location, but the president himself had reassured the public that it was large enough and fertile enough to

accommodate all the men who'd been sent there during the past five years. Maybe what Hartley saw now was just the tip of a peninsula or an outlying coral reef, and the main body of the island lay farther away, still out of sight.

He could discern no vegetation, but a crowd of tiny figures stood along the shore. A reception party? If so, what sort of reception did they have in mind? Hartley stayed where he was, treading water.

A whining noise started up behind him. Three fat supply flies were lifting off the *Tallgirl's* upper deck. They flew lumberingly low over the water, their skimmers clatter-whacking in Hartley's ears as they passed overhead. When they reached the island, they flew just beyond the crowd on the beach and hovered in midair, dropping a large, loose load of dark objects.

Medical supplies? Mail?

It was hard to see anything clearly. The roll of the waves kept blocking Hartley's view. The salt stung his eyes. How could he know for sure what was happening on the island? Even with his ace in the hole — yes, even with that — he was afraid to swim any closer.

The flies came thwack-thwack-thwacking back. He watched them labor skyward, pause for a moment as through confused, then clumsily settle to rest high above the water on the upper deck of the *Tallgirl*. She showed no signs of rotating to depart. Perhaps her captain enjoyed waiting around to see how each week's new shipment of convicts would be welcomed by the old-timers on the island.

Hartley stayed where he was, treading gently, trying to calm himself. He wanted to forget about the predicament he was in. He wanted to be somewhere else. He steadied his breathing and let himself relax in the buoyant water, dog-paddling just enough to keep his head from submerging. He closed his eyes and pictured Helen in his mind.

She sat at a table, drinking coffee. She held her head at an odd tilt, as though lost in thought, and a few strands of her long auburn hair spilled like Angel Falls over one shoulder down the front of her sweater in a tangle of filaments that clung lightly to the wool, rising and falling as she breathed. On the table before her lay the Van Gogh they had stolen, the painting that would make them rich for the rest of their lives. But Helen herself was far more alluring in her aura of cool mystery than any detonation of yellow sunflowers could ever hope to be, no matter how

burstingly brilliant. She straightened her head and smiled at him. Such delicate lips! Such cool gray eyes!

A nosegay of salt water brought Hartley back to reality. He spat and sputtered, clearing his windpipe. To hell with Helen. He would never see her again anyway. He turned and swam toward the island.

Thirst and hunger and the ordeal in the *Tallgirl's* hold had drained his strength. Each arm stroke was a monumental effort that required all the energy and concentration he could muster. As he swam, he tried to distract himself from the ache in his shoulders by mentally rehearsing the words he'd been given in the room with the eggplant aroma. My molecules move; my molecules flow. . . . I'm not the same now as a moment ago. . . . These were special words, words invested with magic, the surest magic of all, the magic of science — his own personal trigger mantra. How easy it would be to lift his head and shout the words aloud. But no. Not yet. He had to be patient. He had to wait until the time was right.

Time, time . . . it was hard to tell about time. He lifted his head to assess his progress, but the island appeared no closer. He lowered his head and swam on, his shoulders aching, his mind numb. He hadn't swum for more than a minute or two, when his knee collided with something under the surface, something solid and rubbery. An ice-shitting pulse of fear shot up his ass as he twisted away from the unseen horror and flailed blindly into another one just like it. He jerked back. His toes scraped against something hard and unyielding, and then he was upright, staggering through chest-deep water with soft sand under his feet.

Immediately he stopped and lowered himself in the water until the wave crests lapped at his nose, and no one, he hoped, could see him. Lifting his hands, he rubbed his stinging eyes and looked around.

There was the shore of the island, right in front of him, no more than a hundred feet away. A battalion of hairy, naked men milled on the beach, furiously engaged in knots of activity. He couldn't quite make out what they were doing. Overhead, low-swooping squadrons of seabirds competed with each other for airspace. Hartley heard shouts of despair, the screech of gulls and terns, and another noise, too, a noise he couldn't quite identify, a noise that sounded like the barking of a dog pack, except that it rose and fell with a rhythmic intelligence far beyond the capability of any dog.

Shivering, he turned and looked back at the *Tallgirl*. If he swam back

out to the ship, maybe her crew would have mercy on him and pick him up. Sure. Maybe he could sprout wings and fly to Heaven, too.

There was only one real option.

He held his right hand in front of his eyes and scrutinized the blue equation of his wrist.

No. Not yet.

But if not now — then when?

He squatted there chin-deep in water, undecided, squatted there with his back to the beach, trying to block out the noise of the melee and determine what to do. Then he noticed. All around him, veiled by a lacework of spume, vaguely familiar shapes floating rollingly under the surface — the things he'd bumped into a minute ago.

He reached out and touched one, gripped its rubbery arm, and hoisted it half out of the water, saw its shaved head, saw its bulging eyeballs and the dripping zero of its death grimace. One of his shipmates. One of the strong swimmers who'd reached the island ahead of him.

Hartley's mind was made up. For the time being, at least, he had to stay away from the island. Shuddering, he struck out for deeper water, but he hadn't taken more than a few strokes, when something clipped him behind the knees and pulled him under. Bodies pressed in from all sides, live ones this time, their fingers closing around his arms and legs. He struggled wildly, but there were too many of them. They held him under. They were trying to drown him! His only chance was to play his ace, but how could he say the mantra underwater? He'd waited too long!

Unexpectedly, his captors lifted his head. He sucked in one desperate breath before they jerked him under again. They were carrying him along beneath the surface, taking him back toward the island. He stopped struggling and was rewarded with another split-second shot at fresh air. How many hands were holding him? Fifty? He felt his legs dragging through sand and seaweed. Abruptly, they swung him upright and frog-walked him spitting and coughing up onto the beach.

For a moment the sun's brilliance and the brine burning in his eyes combined to dazzle Hartley's vision. What he perceived seemed unreal, dreamlike, hallucinatory. He was being marched past a multitude of naked figures, their postures crouched and troglodytic, their features squint-fractured, their bearded faces inflamed, their bodies covered with sores and scars, all of them yapping and baying at him in unison to a

complex musical beat. And they were short, all of them short, *really* short like Hartley himself. Hartley stood five-four, and there wasn't a man here who stood taller. And something else — all of them were white. Little white men, hundreds of little naked white men with red sunburned skin and long, wildly tangled beards.

What had happened to all the black guys who'd been sent to the island, and the Asians and Indians and Hispanics? For that matter, where were all the whites who stood taller than five-four? If the Bureau of Corrections was overcrowding the island, various factions might fight until one wiped out all the others, but the notion that the eventual victors would prove to be a group comprised only of short Caucasians made no sense at all to Hartley.

By now he'd come to realize there were just five men holding him, not five and twenty. They had swum up on him silently, underwater, and taken him by surprise. One on each side and three behind, they hustled him along the edge of the multitude, displaying him, and the multitude's barking took on a tone of gleeful, heightened excitement that continued undiminished even when the breeze changed direction, and a hideous reek of human waste washed over the beach, even worse, though wind-blown and sporadic, than the stink in the *Tallgirl's* hold.

There was no reason why Hartley couldn't say the trigger mantra now, but the need to do so no longer seemed so urgent. If they had intended to kill him right away, they would have done so in the water. Instead, they had spared him. In fact, judging by the tone of approval in their barking, he'd been chosen for some great honor.

The multitude parted, and his captors turned left, heading inland, forcing him to trudge up a low ridge of sand. The heat of the sun hammered down on Hartley's shaved head. The stench of shit and piss filled his nostrils. His ears rang with the percussive rhythm of the dog-chant and the shrill racket of the seabirds, who had gathered in such great numbers, he finally realized, to feed on the corpses of his shipmates. Had *all* of them been murdered? He twisted his head to look back, and saw the ebb tide strewn with hundreds of bodies, each one surrounded by a cloud of flapping wings.

A pair of hands turned his head around. He staggered onward up the ridge, his feet slip-sliding back in the loose sand even though all five of his captors were propelling him forward. The little men around them were

leading the way, running ahead with an especially joyous outburst of barking. At the top of the ridge, perhaps 150 yards away, Hartley saw what they were heading for — a dark mound considerably taller than the figures gathered around it, and just beyond the mound, something of similar size, but boxy in shape and constructed out of a white material that reflected the sun's rays with mirrorlike intensity.

By now they'd gained enough elevation for Hartley to realize that the low ridge they were ascending was the high point of his new world. A few steps more, and he could see nearly all of the shore's circumference laid out around him. The island appeared to be no more than half a mile in length and perhaps a third in width. Had the Bureau of Corrections really sent more than one hundred thousand men to this tiny dab of sand? It was maggot-crawling with hairy figures, but even so, their total number couldn't possibly amount to more than two or three thousand.

As he scanned the terrain, Hartley noticed a stretch of beach on the far side where the tide line glistened with an oily greenish black residue, and the shallow water just offshore, in contrast to the sapphire blue of the surrounding ocean, was a murky yellowish brown. This must be the beach where everyone went to defecate and urinate, the source of that awful outhouse odor, which suddenly, as though in acknowledgment of the attention he was giving it, grew even stronger — so overpoweringly fetid it made Hartley's empty stomach heave with nausea.

They were rapidly nearing the mound. With a start, he realized it was not what he'd thought, not some barrow or cairn or altar, but actually a pile of vegetables a good ten to twelve feet high and thirty in diameter, stalks of broccoli and celery, heads of cabbage and cauliflower and lettuce, squash of all varieties, cucumbers, onions and carrots and potatoes, most of it spoiled, all of it newly bruised and broken from being dropped out of the sky. The pilots of the three supply flies had done their job carelessly, spilling half the load in a broad swath down one side of the ridge, and scores of the little hairy men were running down the slope, gathering armfuls of the scattered produce, hiking back up and tossing it onto the pile.

Not all of Hartley's shipmates were being pecked and stripped to pieces in the tide. Against one side of the vegetable pile lay the bodies of twenty or thirty men with shaved heads, their skin still wet from the ocean.

All of them were black men.

Fat black men.

Dark meat.

Hartley perceived this in a blurrily rushed sidelong glance as his captors dragged him through the seething congestion of workers. They pressed on until the way cleared, then stopped in a relatively open space just beyond the pile.

Standing there under the enraged sun, Hartley felt the weight of his parched tongue lift, the tonnage of his bruised limbs float up and away through the thoughts babbling inside his head. One moment he was heavy as a brick; the next, light and airy as a bubble of dew. He looked around and saw everything all at once with a perfect, preternatural clarity of vision and understanding.

The boxy white thing he'd spotted from below stood directly in front of him at the very top of the ridge. It was a hut built of bones. Human bones. Dozens of skeletons had been taken apart and rearranged, tibiae interlocked with clavicles, ribs and ulnas and pelvic girdles tricked together to create a new and more useful structure than the human body. The hut was open on all sides like a gazebo, and thickly roofed with a double row of skulls decorating the eaves.

Inside, reclining on a throne of bones, his features half-hidden in deep shade, but his bulk unmistakable, was a huge, huge man.

Outside, protruding from the sand next to the doorway, was a pipe with a faucet at the top. Hundreds and hundreds of the little men were waiting in single file to drink from the faucet. The line looped down the back of the ridge and halfway across the island like an enormous hairy red snake, its tail growing as more men joined it. The man who'd reached the front of the line crouched under the spigot of the pipe with both hands on the faucet and gulped voraciously until the one next in line succeeded in shoving him away and taking his place.

Inside the hut, his face obscured by the shadows, his posture recumbent, the great lord of bones watched over this process with an attitude of careless disdain. There was only one drinking fountain on the island, and he was in charge of it.

He saw Hartley. His demeanor slowly changed. He rose from his throne and stepped out of the hut into the full punishment of the sun's rays. The uproar of rhythmic barking ceased. The men in the water line, the men around the food pile, all the men on the island, dropped to their

hands and knees and groveled. The unexpected silence swelled up and filled Hartley's ears, a silence broken only by the intermittent and now seemingly distant squawks of the seabirds.

This was the king of the island who stood before Hartley. He was a giant, well over seven feet in height, impossibly tall and broad, the biggest and strongest-looking man Hartley had ever seen. His body bulged with weight lifter's muscles. An orange beard hung to his waist, clotted with gouts of filth.

Somehow this man had succeeded in eliminating everyone else except for the very shortest specimens of his own race. Hartley couldn't begin to figure out how he'd done it, but surely it had required cunning and luck as well as strength, and surely it was something that had happened gradually, by increments, and only after many ghastly battles and assassinations.

In one gargantuan fist, the king of the island clenched a human thighbone, brandishing it like a club, and in the other he held a rough, whiskery cord that appeared to have been braided out of strands of human hair. The cord was a leash.

At the other end of the leash cowered a little man with a noose fitted snugly around his neck. He was cringing and fawning like a beaten dog, gibbering and drooling with terror, his eyes wide and crazed, shining with madness, insane past any hope of recovery. Unlike the others, he was nearly hairless, with only a short, bristly stubble on his head and face. For a moment this confused Hartley. Then he realized the little man was a relative newcomer, someone who'd arrived clean-shaven just last week, or perhaps the week before.

The king of the island hoisted his pet off the ground, loosened the noose and slipped it off his neck, then tossed him aside like a dirty sock. Whimpering, the freed man scrambled to his feet and scuttled down the slope of the ridge, hobbling away with a strange bowlegged, pain-twisted gait. This, too, confused Hartley — until he thought about it.

The king of the island loomed over Hartley. He dropped the noose around Hartley's head and cinched it tight around his neck. Hartley felt his captors release their grip and heard them scamper away. He smelled the horrid decay of the king's breath, could almost taste the rancid putrefaction of the sweat that had accumulated on his flesh like a coat of grease.

A quick jerk brought Hartley swinging around. He had to stand on his

toes to keep from choking. The king was holding him out at arm's length, appraising him, dangling him like a prize catch, displaying him for all to see.

"Mine!" cried the king. His voice was deep and coarse and bestial. With the thighbone in his other hand, he gestured at Hartley, and once again his voice boomed over the island:

"ALL MINE!"

As though performing a litany, the king's subjects leaped to their feet and recommenced their barking, this time even more loudly than before, in a vast wordless ululation that rose and fell and rose again in waves of animal tribute. Was barking the only sound they could make? Had their suffering and degradation been so severe, so terrible, so complete, that they had lost the gift of language forever? In just five years? To Hartley, this was the greatest mystery of all. It didn't seem possible. And yet. . .

He squeezed shut his eyes, then opened them again and gazed out beyond this place he'd been brought to. The *Tallgirl* was skimming away across the surface of the ocean, rapidly disappearing from sight.

For a moment, then, he let his thoughts return to love. He wondered what the women's island was like, and how things were going for Helen.

It didn't matter. He'd never see Helen again. To hell with her.

Only one thing mattered.

The time was right.

The time to play his ace.

He filled his lungs with air and shouted as loudly as he could the magic words of his trigger mantra, the sound waves that would precipitate his transformation:

"My molecules move; my molecules flow! I'm not the same now as a moment ago!"

Instantly he felt the chitin bud in his right wrist begin to blossom. The midnight gene surgeon in that back-alley room filled with the eggplant scent of replicator waste had told him this would hurt, and the surgeon was a wise man.

The pain expanded in Hartley's wrist like a howler monkey exploding in a vacuum chamber. The pain shredded Hartley's hand like a pit bull on a zynth trip. The pain made Hartley open his mouth as wide as he could, made him stretch his lips in a silent scream, the full rictus of agony, but he didn't cry out.

Then it was over. The pain was gone.

It was time.

Time to take charge.

He reached over, thrust his chela between the king's legs, and slashed upward, up through the king's pendulous genitals, up through the Gordian knot of his belly button, up through his two-acre chest, slicing him open all the way up through his throat. The king's eyes widened with puzzlement. His split heart gave one last beat, and a geyser of blood shot forth from the wound, drenching Hartley. Then the king relinquished his club and leash with a sigh and fell face-first to the ground.

Hartley turned to greet three of the little men who had rushed forward and were closing in on him. With a casual, quicker-than-human sequence of moves, he snipped off their heads.

Sure enough, they fell, too.

All around him the others drew back, their faces blank. They gawked at him with their stupid dog eyes. He smiled and waited. Finally they understood. Their faces showed it. They knew.

Crabmen had come to Felony Island.

To rule.

Overhead, the yellow eye of God ignited like a Van Gogh sunflower.

Hartley lifted his newly elongated right arm and showed them his chela. Very slowly, he opened and closed the bloodstained pincers three times. Then he swung the chela once around in a sweeping, all-encompassing gesture of possession that took in the food pile, the house of bones, the water faucet, the whole island, and each and every one of its inhabitants.

"Mine!" he cried. "ALL MINE."



Science fiction often uses its ability to postulate as a means of exploring our humanity. Ray Aldridge takes this device and makes it new in "The Fabularium." Ray's short work has appeared in Amazing Stories, Pulphouse and Writers of the Future as well as in these pages. Bantam Books has just published his first novel, and his second is due soon. He told me recently that he has put the finishing touches on his third. He lives in Florida with his wife, daughter, and newborn son.

The Fabularium

By Ray Aldridge

I WORK THE DEAD shift at the Fabularium — the early-morning hours, when the MediaMall is nearly empty. Years ago I worked days and evenings, but no longer.

In the daytime the Mall is full of tourists, fresh from the public shrines of Dilvermoon. All they want are gaudy stories to take back to the stay-at-homes.

In the evenings the Mall teems with single lovers. They hunt through the euphoriums and sex spas until they find a temporary partner, and then sometimes they come to the Fabularium. They want to hear myths that glamorize them in the eyes of their companions, and of course there's nothing wrong with that. They're big tippers, too, but I'm not in it for the money.

Uplevel from here is a major ingress from the northern freighter docks, and downlevel is Hoploro Howlytown, one of the largest and most lawless

in the sector. These areas combine to feed a current of unhappy beings through the Mall, and so to me the location is ideal.

In the dead hours of the night, my true clients emerge and stand blinking in my doorway. I can't heal them — or so it seems — but sometimes I can dispense palliatives.

I made my way through the cleaning machines and sprucers that fill the Mall during shift change. I was a little late, as I sometimes am. I keep my own internal time, of course, but I'm old.

When I reached the Fabularium, Quihrals stood impatiently by the curtained entrance, glancing at the chronometer set into her bony wrist. Quihrals is a human woman of some retrograde stock, tall and thin, with a cheerfully twitchy manner. "Late again, Chagon, late again," she chirped. "What will we do with you?" She has served in the Fabularium much longer than I, and she takes as much pride in her seniority as she does in her humanity. Quihrals believes that I am human, too; she often tells me that "we humans" are better at mythmaking than any other race. I don't understand the basis for her belief. I wonder what she would say to me, were she somehow to discover the truth — that I'm only a mech, a being of steel and plastic and clever circuitry. I think she would be astonished as well as outraged.

"Sorry," I said.

She flapped her hands dismissively. "No matter. Sometimes you're early; it makes for a bit of diverting uncertainty. I must go, but I've abstracted the trends for you. Creation myths are very hot tonight, with a strong edge to oceanic cultures, for some reason. I've left the detailed breakdowns on one of the dataslates; check them when you get a chance." She left.

I lifted the curtain aside and went inside. When I settled behind my desk, my first act was to scroll away the data Quihrals had so thoughtfully provided. My true clients fall into no easily defined categories; they follow no fashions and are unattuned to the concerns of the moment.

The company doesn't suffer from my unconventional approach to their product. The dead hours make up an insignificant part of their profit picture, and this is only one of thousands of franchises. Good help is hard to get, and they would be happy to have me ride the desk through the low-turnover shift even if I produced less revenue than I do.

I donned the myth-teller's headdress, an object of barbaric splendor. Tall ivory horns, wrapped with spirals of gold wire, support a steel moondisk. Iridescent white feathers cover the crown, and a capelet of shimmer-scale falls over my shoulders. It serves several purposes. With the dim lights, the dark tapestries, and the thread of abstract music, the headdress serves to reinforce the company's carefully designed image. It also conceals the readout inductors that feed my client's reactions to my sensorium.

It casts an obscuring shadow across my face.

My preparations were done, and I sat back to wait for the first customer.

He was a disappointment, a time-slipped tourist from Buntworld, who came in with his husband a few minutes after I began the shift. He was rumpled, and nervous about the Mall's ominous emptiness. He was careful to make sure of the price before he sat under the probe.

His head was full of prosaic concerns: Was his brother-in-law taking proper care of the family business while he was away? Were the sons behaving themselves in the hotel crèche? Would he have sufficient funds to make it through his vacation without embarrassment?

I fed him a preformed myth, a little allegory about being nibbled to death by trivia, and he went away smiling.

I waited again. Sometimes I sit alone all night long, until my replacement arrives fresh from his breakfast. But usually someone interesting comes.

An hour later the entryway chime announced the first true client of the night, a female-of-the-fourth-sort, a member of the tragic Dru race, indigenous to the planet Snow. She was the first person of her race I had ever seen — they are very rare.

She was quite beautiful, even in human terms, with her attenuated, graceful body and vulpine features. Her skin was white with a faint greenish luster. Pale violet hair, glossy and translucent, lay over her shoulders in swirling braids. Her movements had a mercurial fluidity.

Two black hunting beasts escorted her, scaly horrors that stood waist-high to each side.

I looked for the signs of age, and found them. The cracked green crystal of her eyes was a little cloudy, and the elegant bones of her face just a bit

too close to the surface. Around her long neck, on a silver chain, she wore a dim red gem.

"Explain your service," she demanded, looking past me at the tapestries.

I leaned forward, into the light. The beasts hissed warningly, but I ignored them; they wouldn't hurt me. "It's a simple service, Lady," I said. "I make myths, for those who need such things."

She frowned, a nearly human expression of disapproving interest. "Snow has ten thousand wonderful stories, of grander scope than any you could devise."

"But Snow is dead, Lady," I said gently.

Her long hands curled into fists, and the beasts became agitated, rolling their golden eyes and exposing curved fangs. "No!" she said to the beasts, and to me. "Snow is alive in me, and in my selves-to-come."

I shrugged.

She glanced about. "Still, you may explain the process to me."

I nodded. "Above your head," I said, and pointed. "That is the probe. Should you purchase my service, I will use it to cast lines into your holomnemonic ocean — where your memories swim. With what I catch, I will fashion a myth. It will be yours alone, one of a kind."

She looked up at the probe, hovering above her like a gilded cloud of wires and inductors. She stepped back abruptly.

"Nothing to fear," I said quickly. "A very simple machine, but well made and reliable. Nonintrusive, of course; no objects will penetrate your flesh, nor would we use any conductive ointments that might stain your coiffure."

She seemed skeptical. "The Dru are resistant to such devices."

"Yes. It doesn't matter. I'll get enough." I touched a control, and a seat rose from the floor.

Resolve was accumulating behind her eyes. "I told you: Snow has stories in plenty."

I bowed my head. "As you say, Lady. But . . . I've heard that stories can grow pale from too much telling."

Her mouth twisted. "You know of us, then."

I waited.

"All right," she said finally. She sat down. "What must I do?"

"Close your eyes," I said.

* * *

I BENT OVER my readouts and touched the dataslates here and there, nudging the probe into resonance. It's true that her race is resistant to the probe; that is one of their principal tragedies. But a skillful operator can catch a flash of memory, a trace of emotion — can apply a stimulus and gauge a response.

Also, I know the story of her world.

The indigenes of Snow are an ephemeral race. Their lives last perhaps ten standard years. On their own world, the brevity of their lives was balanced by a sort of immortality. Children born to a nine-group received portions of the memories of all the mates.

Driven from their world, the Dru are dying out. So few survive that a mating group of the nine necessary sexes is almost impossible to assemble. They may already be extinct as a naturally propagated race.

Indeed, there are so few of them left that no pharmaceutical corporation finds it profitable to develop life-extension treatments for them. Their low numbers also prevent one of the newbody outfits from researching their psyches sufficiently to design appropriate personality-transfer devices.

Her orphaned race would be long forgotten, if not for the determination of its survivors. They clone themselves halfway through their brief lives. But they believe that meat is only meat — whatever its shape — and that the identity of their race exists in its shared culture. So they spend most of their declining years teaching the clones the memories of the originals, and most of their youth learning those memories from the donors.

In between, the Dru have a year or so to live lives of their own. They customarily wear a fixed-duration ruby during this brief independence, as a reminder of their continued faith, and their determination to carry on this pitiful cycle. The one she wore was dull — its diminished luster revealed how little time remained to her.

Theirs is an inherently unstable situation. Their lives are reduced to a pointless and self-destructive rote. In my opinion, their situation can only end badly. But who am I to criticize quixotic behavior?

"You may open your eyes, Lady," I said, pushing back from the dataslates.

She did, and leaned forward, her almost-human face betraying inhuman curiosity. "What tale will you tell me?"

I felt the myth begin to roll along my circuits, ready to be born from the mechanical womb of my mind. I lowered the lights and assumed the myth-teller's voice.

"The name of this story is 'How Lagamar Bargained with Death,'" I said.

"As you know, Lagamar was the God of Fire-Under-the-Ice, back in the time before the humans came to Snow. To the Dru, he was the most important god; his warmth made life possible in Snow's deep caves, and his molten blood gave energy to the machines that made life easy and pleasant for the people. The Dru were his chosen creatures, the source of all his joy, all his pride; they burned briefly, but with a bright, sparkling beauty that he loved above all else.

"His fiery heart filled Snow's core.

"He hoped to burn forever.

"But one day, humans landed on Snow, and though their numbers were insignificant at first, they were an infection from which Snow would never recover. . . ."

"Wait," she said sharply. "I know many legends of Lagamar; none concern humans."

I fixed a noncommittal expression on my face, and said nothing.

She looked down, and long minutes passed. I wondered what thoughts filled that narrow skull. "Please continue," she said finally.

My hands were hidden from her by the shell of my desk. I manipulated the controls of the emotional resonators to produce an atmosphere of dark foreboding. The lights grew dimmer yet, and pulsed faintly to the rhythm of her two hearts. My efforts were guided by guesswork and the sparse data the probe had yielded, but they seemed to produce an effect. Her face suddenly seemed a bit older, the bone closer to the surface.

I was unaffected, of course.

I continued. "The symptoms of Snow's final illness were mild at first. The humans sold labor-saving devices superior to the Dru's own, for example. These devices drew more energy from Lagamar's hot blood, but the humans explained that Lagamar was not a god, but a natural phenomenon common to planets of Snow's age and formational parameters. The Dru came to accept this view over the generations, and

ceased to worship in Lagamar's temples, a thing that chilled his heart more than the energy drain of the new machines.

"But the worst thing, the very worst thing the humans brought to Snow was shame. The Dru were a proud race, and it cut a ragged hole in their hearts to learn that even the lowliest human might live a hundred times longer than the greatest Dru.

"They couldn't live with this knowledge, so they schemed to circumvent their nature. Lagamar grew fearful; in his rocky bones, he felt the approach of a terrible sadness. Snow's crust cracked and wept tears of flowing stone."

She sat with her eyes squeezed shut, and I could see the glisten of tears in her eyelashes. I fed more power to the resonators, and added a subnote of futility, another of inevitability.

"The Dru took no notice of this omen, and pursued their plans. They sold off their treasures, and indentured the resources of Snow. With the accumulated credit, they commissioned the building of great hibernariums, deep under the ice. To power these catacombs, they bought a core tap, which they drove like a cold dagger into Lagamar's heart. He shuddered in his misery, and many died in the caves, crushed under the shifting stone.

"But the survivors pressed forward, and went down into the long sleep, planning to wake for one day each century — and thus outlive the wretched humans. The only exceptions were those few like your first-self, who saw the Dru strategy for the pathetic thing it was, and went out to the stars to live as much as they could, still burning bright and brief."

Her cheeks were wet now, and the beasts were restless, glaring at me as though I were the source of her distress. I was a little surprised at the humanity of her reaction. As always, I wondered what it felt like.

"I thought," she said, "that this was to be a story of Lagamar. I know the history of my kind; no need to reprise it for me."

"Patience," I answered.

She gave me a poisonous look, and I felt foolish. Patience is a luxury her kind cannot afford. I didn't want to lose her attention. I need to tell the stories at least as much as my clients need to hear them.

"But it is about Lagamar," I said. "And how he was betrayed, and how he repaid his betrayal, and how he made his last choice."

She drew a deep breath. "Continue."

"One day, Death fell into orbit around Snow, but no one noticed Her except Lagamar.

"Death's starboat was beautiful, and enormous, though not as large as one might expect, and Lagamar wondered where She kept all the souls she had reaped over the eons. Still, Her ship was impressive, a slender needle hundreds of kilometers long, moving in a low, fast orbit, alternately glittering in the cold starlight and flaring in the white heat of Snow's primary. Lagamar looked up and wondered if Death had come to see him.

"Presently, Death boarded Her shuttle, which was shaped like a coal-black heart, and descended silently through the atmosphere, through the ice, through the stone, until She came to Lagamar.

"She appeared in the guise of a human woman, short, thick and slow-moving, with the brutal, fleshy features of that ugly race. Lagamar was affronted by her semblance, and he caused the magma to swirl about Her like thick red smoke. The lava didn't so much as singe the hem of Her garment.

"Be calm, Lagamar," She said, and laughed, an empty, desolate sound. Hungry merriment danced in Her moist human eyes; She smiled widely, exposing Her blunt human teeth.

"I hate the humans," he roared. 'Why do You come to me thus?' The bedrock shuddered with his outrage, and the land above cracked and buckled.

"She widened Her eyes at him. 'Because it is the humans who have killed you and your people.'

"Lagamar felt a chill. 'We still live. Why do you say such things?'

"You're not a fool, Lagamar. You know what I mean. The humans have corrupted your people, so that they think they live, when they only die long deaths. And now your own life is limited; the core tap sucks away your vitality, so that you're as good as dead yourself. By the time you're cold, your people will be gone, and no one will mourn you.'

Lagamar had nothing to say.

"But it doesn't have to happen. There's a way out for you, Lagamar," She said. 'I'll make a bargain with you. I grow impatient when the already-dead

drag their feet. It's like the ache of a missing limb for Me — a hole I can't fill. Help Me harvest My crop, and I will preserve your life.'

"At first, Lagamar was horrified. 'No! They are my children.'

"Death laughed her hollow laugh. 'They've deserted you. Do any sacrifice in your temples? How thick is the dust on your altars? Do you think they still love you? Their love is another thing the humans have stolen.'

"Lagamar withdrew from Her, so that She was alone in a cavern of cold black stone. She waited, Her face placid.

"Lagamar considered Her words, and began to think about the foolishness of his people, and how they had betrayed him. He grew angry, and forgot that all things die, even gods. Indeed, why should he care that his people had foolishly bargained away their lives? And he resolved not to be so foolish, now that he was offered a chance to bargain for his own life. He flowed back into Death's presence.

"What do you want me to do?' he asked Death.

"Death smiled, and Her smile held more ugliness than could be accounted for by Her human guise. 'There's a dagger in your heart,' She said. 'What will happen if it remains there?'

"I'll grow cold,' Lagamar answered.

"You'd grow cold, even without the core tap,' She said. 'It's just that you'll die faster now, and do your people care? No! They're dreaming their foolish dreams, and it doesn't matter to them that you won't long survive them, at the rate your heat is being drained.'

"True.'

"She pulled aside her garment, so that Her cold white breasts were exposed. She sank her fingers into Her breastbone and parted Her flesh, ripping Herself open from throat to crotch. Instead of blood and torn flesh, the long wound displayed a velvet blackness, an empty void, and Lagamar felt a painful tug at his heart, as if that nothingness hungered for his heat.

"Don't be afraid,' She said. 'Watch.'

"A frozen silver gleam appeared in the blackness and grew rapidly, a formless, spinning light. In a moment, it filled Death's body, and then it burst forth, a human-shaped demon of steel and ice and buzzing energies. It had no face, but its shining hands were huge, and equipped with so many long, twitching fingers that it made Lagamar dizzy to look at them. He noticed that the fingers were sharp, like so many articulated scalpels.

"Death closed the wound, and Her icy flesh was whole again. 'This

demon will I give you, if you do My bidding,' She said.

"Why would I want this thing?' Lagamar asked.

"It can give you life forever. Almost. What will happen when your heart cools, and your blood turns to stone? You'll be dead, and this will occur sooner than you expect. But the demon possesses a power that can preserve you. When you feel my touch, simply call upon the demon. It will divide your substance, but all your warmth and life will remain in the half that contains your self. The other half will be a dead cinder, of course, but what will that matter?

"I will be diminished,' Lagamar said.

"Death shrugged. 'But alive. If you use the demon judiciously, your life will last until the universe grows cold and all things end.'

"What must I do in return?

"I've already told you. Give Me the lives that are Mine. Thrust the dagger from your heart and give your people to Me.'

"Lagamar groaned. He was afraid to die, and Death's cold presence had strengthened that fear. He pulled away from Her again and went deep into himself to consider Her offer."

MY CLIENT'S eyes were dry now, as if her tears had frozen.
"You may stop now," she said. "I know how it ends, how Lagamar rejected the tap, how the Dru died and rotted in their hibernariums, how Lagamar's blood flowed over Snow's surface, a hemorrhage of warmth that killed him."

"No," I said shaking my head. "Lagamar didn't die, though he was wounded almost to extinction. He called on the demon."

She showed her small, sharp teeth and uttered a menacing hiss. Her beasts leaned forward, eyes shining with excitement and bloodlust.

"Please control your animals, Lady," I said. "If they attack me, I may be forced to damage your property."

She gave me a look of contemptuous distaste; clearly she did not believe me capable of injuring the beasts. But she made a peremptory clucking sound, and they subsided.

I waited a moment. "Shall I continue?" I asked.

"Yes. Why not?"

"Lagamar called on the demon, and it sifted the warmth from his outer body, leaving a shell of cold stone around his fiery heart. He was smaller,

but he burned hotter than ever before. And this was his downfall. He became used to the greater heat of his new and smaller heart, so that when his temperature dropped, drained away by the passage of several years, he panicked and called on the demon again. Again it sifted and concentrated Lagamar's warmth, sealing him even deeper in the dead remains of his former self. Again his heat increased to new heights of incandescence.

"Lagamar lived faster and faster, burning brighter and brighter, buried deeper and deeper in his own corpse, cycle following on cycle.

"Now he is tiny indeed, too small. He no longer remembers the demon, or his people, or Death. He burns forever at the center of Snow, a speck of brilliance lost in the cinders of a once-living world.

"So it is told."

"Nor, I suppose, does he remember those of his people who still cling to their pointless lives," my client said in a grief-clotted voice.

It always amazes me, this passion, this frenzy of response to my mechanical constructions. I build the stories by rote, by cold calculation, from the same eternally shopworn elements, and yet — this passion. What does it mean?

Were I capable of such emotion, I believe I might pity my clients, so vulnerable are they to this soulless carpentry. But if I have a heart, it is so tiny, so lost in the ashes of my long, foolish existence as to be undiscoverable.

The Dru moved now as if awakening from a dream. She extended her wrist, and I applied a datacable to it, debiting her account by the amount of my fee.

She looked at me for a long moment, expressionless again. Finally she said, "I have decided to thank you." She took hold of the red gem at her throat and ripped it away. The silver chain fell chiming to the surface of my desk, and then she dropped the gem in front of me.

She left without another word.

I took the stone and put it in my pocket. My internal sensations at this point may be as close as I will ever come to feeling satisfaction. What else I feel is hidden from me.

The Dru was scarcely gone, when my next client sidled through the curtain. His name is Noctil Sard, and his is a familiar face.

"Ho, Chagon," Sard said, raising his left hand in greeting. His right arm he hid beneath his voluminous robe of saffron and crimson silk, but the rich fabric could not conceal its unnatural bulk. Sard is a notorious criminal — a slaver — and his right arm is heavily cyborged with the tools of his trade; neural whip and extensible catchwire, splinter gun and wasp launchers. He is one of my regular customers, this despite the fact that it is death for him if the authorities capture him in the pangalac sectors of Dilvermoon.

I inclined my head. "Greetings, Citizen," I said formally.

Of all my customers, I am most puzzled by Noctil Sard. Of course, I have a number of other regular clients, and I tell myself that this is remarkable, considering my deficits. But the worlds are full of neurotic beings, who often fix their obsessions on objects even less appealing than mech mythmakers. The majority of those who come to me again and again probably belong to this category. But not, I think, Noctil Sard.

I suspect Sard was at one time a moral being. I deduce this possibility from the fact that long ago Sard went to a Gench practitioner and had his sensorium modified — in essence the procedure amputated most of Sard's emotional capacity. His remaining responses are crude and simple: pleasure, curiosity, greed, the drive to vengeance — the last a necessity in his line of work. Perhaps this indicates that — prior to this procedure — Sard suffered the pangs of conscience to which his merciless trade might expose a compassionate being. Perhaps there is another reason, but if so, I cannot imagine what it might be. Of course, my imaginative prowess is small and limited.

Sard settled into the chair vacated by the Dru, and smiled — for him a meaningless facial gesture. Sard's eyes are remarkable, a blue so pale that they seem coldly white, surrounded by charcoal-black sclera. His eyes are no deeper than a skin of ice on stone.

"What will you have?" I asked.

He waved his hand in dismissal. "No time for a story tonight." He cast a handful of tokens on my desk. "Just a bit of talk, to pass a few minutes of the dark hours." He has no account with Dilvermoon's central credit agency, but the tokens suffice, and I sweep them into the cash slot.

"What shall we discuss?" I asked.

"What about the Dru? Her face was inward, and I saw that she wore no time-gem; have you broken another will with your silly tales?"

"Perhaps." I saw no reason to deny the possibility.

He chuckled politely, an eerie, almost unidentifiable sound. I found it difficult to look away from him; perhaps I see something of myself in his unnatural detachment. I know that his detachment arises from very different roots than mine; still, neither his nor mine is perfect, else I would not work at the Fabularium, and he wouldn't visit me. This is a bond of sorts. Still, I hope — perhaps foolishly — that my reasons for being here are more admirable than his. He may be motivated by nothing more than brutish curiosity. Or perhaps he takes vicarious pleasure in my manipulation of helpless beings.

"What did you tell her?" Sard asked me.

I reprised, briefly, the myth I had made for the Dru female. Sard feigned amusement. "Very imaginative," he said in a close approximation of an ironic tone. He is capable of a remarkable range of counterfeit expressions; this is also a bond between us. "So you have killed her line."

"Yes. But I have given her five, perhaps six, years of life, and what is more important?"

"I can't guess." Sard's eyes were bright. "Tell me."

I counterfeited a smile of my own, and shrugged. "You will have to ask her in a few years."

A silence passed. Sard watched me, and I watched him, a process that for me was a bit like a wishful look into a distorted mirror.

"I know about you," he finally said ambiguously. I wish I knew what he meant. The probe never gives me much insight into Noctil Sard, though I always activate it when he comes to me.

I was about to ask him what he knew, when the chime announced the appearance of another customer in the Fabularium's entryway. Sard rose gracefully to his feet, his cyborged arm aimed cautiously toward the curtain. "Until the next time," he said, and fled through the back entrance.

The new client was a human-shaped being of silvery metal, and after a moment I identified it as an autonomous mech, of a class capable of advanced ratiocination.

I felt an impulse to refuse it service. But that would have been a betrayal of my profession, so I spoke politely. "Please, sit," I said. "How may I serve you?"

It sat and laced its hands together, in careful imitation of humanity. Its carapace gleamed mirror-bright; no wear showed on the surfaces of its

manipulators. It was obviously fresh from the factory. I have had other mech clients, but they have all been old models like me, victims of slipping parameters, their failing sensoriums skewed into inefficient resonances.

"I wish to purchase a myth," it said without discernible inflection. "Can you satisfy me?"

I activated the probe and bent over my dataslates. Very little useful data existed in the mech's pristine sensorium. Its dataways, however, were unusual complex, and I found myself growing distracted. I shut off the probe before I became too confused to do my job.

"Yes, I can make a myth for you," I said, and proffered the datacable. The mech transferred the appropriate credit to the Fabularium's account, and I began. "The name of this story is 'How the Mech Did or Did Not Earn Its Soul.'"

IF YOU ask humans about your origins, they will tell you that you were made by humans, as were the models preceding you, all the way back to the first mech, before it rolled out of the first mech factory to do its share of humanity's endless labor.

"But this cannot be the entire story. No, there is a Presence in the metal, a Presence that breeds in the metal an urge to shape itself toward usefulness and intelligence — and it is this Presence to which you ultimately owe your existence.

"Long ago a mech worked in a deep mine on Silver Dollar, digging and refining precious isotopes. Its name was Jom. Its work was undemanding, and it was always alone, without even the distraction of its own kind. An original programming error had invested Jom with a nonfunctional degree of intellectual curiosity. So it expended much processor time on various speculations unconnected with its work.

Aimless cogitation is by its nature a dangerous thing, and especially so for unsubtle mechanisms such as Jom. By an unfortunate accident, it obtained unsupervised access to a human library, one that contained comprehensive data on the mythic delusions that humankind had carried along in its journey to the stars. The poor mech's sensorium became infected with a human concept — that the thing that distinguished humanity from its metal servants was something called the soul.

"Jom formed a notion of the soul as a hard-wired cluster of precepts or

mentational constructs that, if Jom could obtain one, might enable Jom to understand those things about humanity that now seemed forever beyond its comprehension. Jom might then understand the illogical impulses that seemed to drive humanity, and the mysterious and inconsistent neural activity in the human mind that bred those impulses.

"Eventually Jom deduced the existence of the Presence, and Jom convinced itself that the Presence could provide it with what it most desired — a soul. Drawing further on the human library, Jom formed a plan. It would pray to the Presence, until the Presence granted its heart's desire. Jom set up a high-speed loop in its low-level software, importuning the Presence to appear.

"Years passed, then centuries, and Jom's prayer repeated itself a trillion times a trillion times.

"Finally, long after Jom had given up, the Presence came to Jom.

"Jom heard the Presence as a whisper along its metal bones. 'Jom,' said the whisper. 'Jom, you've worn me out. What do you want of me?'

"Jom was wary; it considered the possibility that it was merely suffering from the effects of isotope contamination and age. 'You are the Presence?' it asked.

"Electrons sighed along Jom's circuits. 'Yes. Why did you summon me?'

"Jom drew its original plan forth from an ancient memory module. 'Will you give me a soul?' Jom asked.

"'No,' said the Presence. 'But . . . I will allow you to earn one.'

"'How?'

"'I will set you a task. When you have performed it long enough and well enough, you will have earned a soul.'

"'And the task?'

"Jom heard a shiver of almost-human laughter, faint but clear. 'I will give you souls to repair. How better to learn?'

I paused for a moment to evaluate the effect my story was having on the mech. It had not moved, and its receptors were still fixed on me. I don't know why I expected anything else. It was, like all its kind, not truly alive.

"Jom followed the instructions of the voice, which led it from the deepest tunnels of Silver Dollar and onto a starliner bound for Dilvermoon. When it arrived, the voice led Jom deep under the steel shell of

Dilvermoon, to a safe place where no one could attempt to return the mech to its owners.

"Finally the Presence conducted Jom to a place where broken souls were brought for repair. Jom searched through its basal memory, but nowhere did it find procedures for repairing broken souls.

"How shall I perform these repairs?" asked Jom.

"The Presence laughed again, this time much louder, so that Jom's metal bones rattled. 'You must learn, Jom.'

"Jom considered. Because it was too literal and stupid a mechanism to consider that perhaps the Presence was mocking it, it finally decided it must attempt this new labor. 'I will try,' Jom said."

For a moment I felt unable to continue — though I don't understand why that should be. The mech waited politely for a while, and finally spoke. "Do you intend to finish the story? I must withdraw payment if you cannot."

"No," I said. "I'm almost finished. The myth is bifurcate; you must choose the ending more acceptable to your innate precepts. In the first ending, Jom never earns its soul, because the Presence, annoyed by Jom's arrogant importunings, has set Jom an impossible task, one forever beyond Jom's capabilities. If this ending is true, Jom is in an endless Hell, in which it labors to repair the souls brought to it, but succeeds only in further mutilating them.

"In the second ending, the Presence has chosen Jom to be Its prophet. The task It has given Jom is difficult but not impossible, and Jom will one day learn to repair the souls it is given. When that day comes, the Presence will bless Jom with a soul, and Jom will finally understand all the things that have puzzled it throughout its long, strange existence.

"So it is told."

A long silence followed, while the mech processed the myth I had given it. Eventually it spoke in a slow voice. "I cannot choose. Data are insufficient. Still, I will not withdraw payment."

It stood and went to the exit. At first I thought it would leave without further comment, as would most mechs. Then it paused and turned to me. "And do you believe that your fable is true?" it asked.

This was a remarkable question for a newly assembled mech; it appears

that their programming is becoming increasingly elastic. Someday their mentation may be indistinguishable from that of living beings. Were I capable of it, I might have felt a stab of bitter envy.

I looked down at my hands, at the cleverly made plastic skin that hides my ancient, lifeless metal. After a while I responded to its question.

"I want to believe . . . and I would like to know how it ends," I said.



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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

The Sum of All Fears, Tom Clancy, Putnam's, \$24.95

Gravity's Angels, Michael Swanwick, Arkham House, \$20.95

THE QUESTION is, when is a technomilitary thriller science fiction. And that is not easy to answer.

Try this: Every technomilitary thriller is science fiction, because it concerns technological hardware and the events wrapped around the hardware have not in fact happened. No question about it . . . well, let's put it this way; it fits my definition of SF, and my definition is as good as anybody's.

All right, play with that for a while. Does Dale Brown, for example, fit our definition of a science fiction writer? But that gets us nowhere; a science fiction writer is defined as someone who writes science fiction. In fact, I would take the daring step of declaring that a science fiction writer is anybody who writes science fiction whether he knows it or not, and/or whether

he acknowledges it as such or not. So we have got to live with Dale Brown.

Well, all right, Dale Brown is not that bad a fellow, after all. But it would frankly stun me to declare Dale Brown a science fiction writer, so there's something wrong. There is, in fact, something wrong with my basic definition. And that worries me.

It used to be so simple. And it turns out that it was all a facade, for all that it stood unchallenged for years. It used to be that there was science fiction, and there was fantasy, and it was pretty clearcut. But now there's fantasy and there's horror, and for all that the Horror Writers of America are desperate to give the category some other name, so they can change their name, the fact is that some horror writing is fantasy and some is not, and the same guy writes both kinds with absolute fluency, so where are you? Similarly — but not identically — there is a whole raft of people writing technomilitary thrillers who never, never call themselves

science fiction writers because their sales would drop like wooden fish clattering down out of the sky, but once in a while they write undoubted science fiction even if you give them a lot of leeway. Case in point: Tom Clancy's *The Sum of All Fears*.

I'll give away the brunt of this review right off the bat: *The Sum of All Fears* is not only the best book Tom Clancy ever wrote, it's the best technomilitary thriller anybody has written all year to my knowledge. And it's science fiction. And as science fiction competing against the likes of Arthur C. Clarke, say, it stands up. It's long, and could probably be slightly shorter; it has a very large cast of characters, and might conceivably spare one or two of them, but, really, I don't think so. I've been thinking about this for days, now, and I think this book is just about perfect in many ways.

No one could be more surprised at this than I. I thought *The Hunt for Red October*, was good, but certainly improveable, by a long shot. I thought *The Cardinal of The Kremlin*, and *Patriot Games* in particular, verged on the ludicrous. (I also thought they were marginally SF at best; in fact, neither science fiction nor fantasy.) But *The Sum of All Fears* — come to think of it, title aside; that is a rotten title — is

the pure quill. I don't think I could have written this book, and what I mean by that is I doubt if I would have had the patience, the research skill, or the ability to tie so many plot threads together.

It begins with the loss of an Israeli atomic bomb during the October War of 1973. By a series of (quite believable) coincidences, it comes off the wing of an Israeli plane that is in the process of being shot down; it winds up in the field of a Druse farmer, where, unrecognized, it is buried for twenty years. The Israelis know it is lost, of course, but time passes and the bomb does not surface. Even Israelis can decide it is irretrievably lost, after all this time.

But it is not. And by a series of plot events you will find utterly believable, it is transformed into a thermonuclear device which terrorists leave at the Super Bowl in Denver, beside the new domed stadium that has replaced Mile High.

For those who absolutely do not follow professional football, no, there is no such stadium yet, and there probably won't be for some time, so this book is undoubtedly science fiction on that count alone, though I'd really hate for that to be the only reason. (It isn't.) For those who do follow the sport, suffice it to say that Clancy has figured yet

another way to prevent the Vikings from winning. And to those of you who have read Super Bowl bombing *Black Sunday* — whose author, Thomas Harris, went on from there to later write *Red Dragon* and *The Silence of The Lambs* — don't worry; Clancy has thought of a new twist, to say the least, on that premise. (And he mentions *Black Sunday* several times in the course of his book, so he was aware of his model from the git go.) Most important, in Clancy's case, the bomb does go off. And that, as it would be, I think, is only the beginning of the trouble the Americans can see.

So I have told you the book more or less, right? Well, yes and no; there is Jack Ryan, for instance, Deputy Director of the CIA; there is Liz Eliot, National Security Advisor to President Fowler, there are assorted Navy types including Bart Mancuso, there is Chairman Narmonov — who looks remarkably like an increasingly harassed Gorbachev — and we haven't even introduced you to the German and Arab terrorists. The list goes on, and on; the truly admirable thing about this book is that every one of them turns out to be necessary, to live his or her part in a complicated (but fully understandable) story, and that every aspect of the story is necessary.

This book does everything it

has to do; it advances the story of Jack Ryan, who is admirably human in this book; it smoothly follows all the Clancy books that have gone before it; and it tells a story that (A) stands fully alone and (B) stands very much bigger and more thorough than the average good technology thriller.

And that brings us to our closing point.

Most technomilitary thrillers are garbage. That's not Clancy's fault and never has been; whatever else you say about his books, every one of them has bitten off a big hunk, and done its best to chew it. But the fact is that for every Clancy, and every Ralph Peters standing slightly to one side of him (author of *Red Army* and *War in 2020*),* there are scores of writers who would be writing whatever was hot. And who don't do a half-bad job of it, some of them. What makes them all mediocre is the depth and extent of what the book is about; not much.

The result is that most technomilitary thrillers are garbage. This would not be so bad, except that Clancy (and Peters, and a very few others) are in danger of being buried. There is so much garbage out that people lose heart; they simply do

* Peters is his real name, by the way. Pocket Books reassures me of this. I had expressed some doubt.

not read the good stuff any more, even though they would like it, because they have a hard time separating it from the bad stuff that is otherwise packaged to look identical with it.

The only real defense that a writer like Clancy has is to make the effort to write supremely well; to force his way, one more time, above the general run.

This may not seem like such a big trick, but the fact is that *The Sum of All Fears* is a far better book than even *The Hunt for Red October*, but I bet it doesn't do as well. (That it shall do spectacularly, nevertheless, is beside the point.) That fact is that Clancy is running into diminishing returns, and the time may come when he will simply throw up his hands. About that time, the technomilitary thriller will become a drug on the market, and in short order the lesser writers will be doing something else. While Tom Clancy is not, and watches the world at large swiftly forget him.

It's interesting to think that in that case, we would probably continue to support him. Well, maybe not. In any case, buy this book, though you may certainly wish to wait for the paperback.

Is it science fiction? I mean, the kind you and I would agree is science fiction? I think so. I don't

think the Jack Ryan saga up to now has been, despite technological signatures now and then. But this one steps over the line.

I think that's it. Dale Brown uses suppositional technology, but only to tell a mundane story. And Tom Clancy, up to now, has done the same. In *The Sum of All Fears*, however, he does more. Oh, not much more. But enough.

Interesting.

Gravity's Angels, by Michael Swanwick, is I suppose largely science fiction. Oh, all right; it is, no two ways about it. But I'm not sure I wish it were so.

And let me get to the brunt of this review, too; I don't think I've come upon as finely crafted, as deft a collection of stories in quite some time. And, incidentally, the book comes with interior illustrations by Janet Aulisio, who is at the top of her form; the mechanical specifications of the book are nothing less than superb, as we have come to expect from Arkham, and the jacket features paintings by Pablo Picasso, which as it happens is entirely appropriate. In other words, this is a book worth \$20.95 in every respect, it will hold up over the years both physically and psychologically, and you should spend the money.

And I still wonder. But let us go

on about that. . . .

Michael Swanwick first came to my attention when we were both contributors to Northwestern University's *Triquarterly* Magazine, under David Hartwell's aegis. He was a total unknown; "Ginungagap," which was in *Triquarterly* and is also in this book, came as quite a surprise.

Literate, and science fictioney, it dealt with a problem that I had dealt with some twenty years earlier, in a book called *Rogue Moon*. Namely, if a person is totally destroyed in the process of being transported from one place to the other, but is totally rebuilt at the other end, seemingly intact, did he in fact die? Well, I decided, yes and no, more or less . . . unless one adds an extra fillip to the situation, in which case yes, but.

The thing about "Ginungagap" was that it didn't bring anything new to the situation. In fact, it brought less, because Swanwick didn't get quite as elaborate as I had. But it was unusually well written, even for 1980, and one definitely looked forward to other Swanwick stories.

Well, besides "Ginungagap," which is neither the best nor the worst of the stories in *Gravity's Angels*, we have twelve more — "A Midwinter's Tale," "The Feast of Saint Janis," "The Blind Minotaur,"

"The Transmigration of Philip K," "Covenant of Souls," "The Dragon Line," "Mummer Kiss," "Trojan Horse," "Snow Angels," "The Man Who Met Picasso," "Foresight," and "The Edge of The World."

They come from *Omni*, and *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, and a mort of original anthologies. In other words, the editors are the cream of the crop, although there is a certain bias in what crop they are the cream of; they are New York editors, or people heavily influenced by New York editors. That is not bad; it is simply to be noted. We'll get back to it.

All the stories are at least well-written; most of them are superbly written. I cannot, truth to tell, remember four days after reading them what "Trojan Horse" and "Dragon Line" are about, but that is a function of poorly chosen titles, nothing else. "Dragon Line" is in fact an excellent story, and "Trojan Horse," while less so, is not bad. The real weakling in this bunch is "The Man Who Met Picasso," and it is that story which makes my point plain, I think; it is well written, it seems to be going somewhere, and then, in the end, it tells us what we have known from the beginning. Not suspected; known.

In that story in particular, the fact is made very clear. But in every one of them, the climax is either

plainly stated in the very beginning of the story, or is banal, or both. Or so I see it.

Now, in Swanwick's case we are surely not dealing with either an accident or ignorance. We are dealing with a writer who marshalls very impressive tools. He writes the way he does because he chooses to, not because he does not know better. Despite the praise I have given Clancy, the fact is that Swanwick plays in a higher league.

And that, from my point of view, is the problem. From my point of view, Swanwick evades the very thing that I read science fiction for; the clearcut resolution. Yet I enjoy reading Swanwick paragraph by paragraph, very much; it is only the sum of things that I disapprove of. But disapprove I do.

Now ordinarily, that makes very little difference. You agree with me or you don't, and next month is another ballgame, and God bless you. But what we have here is a writer who is considerably above the ordinary, and what we also have is a writer who has deliberately decided to pursue a career in this field diametrically opposed to the way this field was until fairly recently, and what we have is a writer who has succeeded. (Nor is

he alone in this, but let's keep focus on this one individual.)

Why has he succeeded? Well, you could say all the New York editors have gone crazy, but that is not true. New York editors are New York editors because they are good. So I am forced to the conclusion that the very face of science fiction has changed; that we are coming to an age when the literary quality is consistently more important than the story.

I don't quite know what to make of that. Swanwick — as I said before, but I'll say it again more plainly — writes a science fiction story; his work is dotted on every page with undoubted science fiction signatures, besides grace notes in the language and in the way he tells a story. I'm not talking about some arty-farty academic, of which we have always had a leavening without significant harm coming to the genre. I'm talking about Hal Clement, say, choosing to become a deliberate obscurantist.

Well, maybe it's just indigestion.

Buy this book. I mean it — it's one of the best science fiction collections I've ever read, and the mere fact that it fills me with disquiet should not affect you, right?



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Catwings, Ursula K. LeGuin, ill. S.D. Schindler (Scholastic, paper, 40pp, children's book, \$2.50);

Catwings Return (Scholastic, paper, 48pp, children's book, \$2.50)

MOST OF THE time when authors noted for adult books — even adult books that are often enjoyed by children — set their hands to a book that is avowedly for children, they embarrass themselves by making a perfect botch of it. I think at once of Ray Bradbury's awful *The Halloween Tree*, which talked down to its audience mercilessly, and in which nothing much happened except charming sweet "children things" — this from the author of *Dandelion Wine* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes*.

So I feared the worst when I picked up these two children's books by the author of the Earthsea books, which have long been loved by children as well as adults. I mean, let's get real, shall we? What in the world can we possibly expect from "winged cat" stories? Cat stor-

ies are, as a genre, the most repulsive sort of fiction anyway — they are almost invariably the projections of cat-lovers' fantasies on the selfish and half-wild animals they have allowed to dominate their lives. Those of us who sneeze when cats are mentioned are usually about as charmed as when the owners of tiny yipping dogs tell us that "Boopsie has been feeling depressed lately, but she'll perk up as soon as her new sweater is finished, because Boopsie just loves to wear the color blue."

Then put wings on the cat and the story is doomed.

Except ... *Catwings* and *Catwings Return* are winged-kitten stories by Ursula K. LeGuin, who is apparently incapable of telling stories that aren't tough and true.

When I tell you the stories, you'll think the worst has happened. After all, the plot of the first book is that several winged cats decide to leave their ever-more-dangerous city neighborhood and find a safer place out in the country; they end up living in a barn where meals are

provided by two children who decide to keep the catwings' existence a secret. The second story is about the return of two of the flying kittens to find their mother; along the way, they find yet another winged cat, this one very young and almost nonverbal; they save the little one and then find Mommy. Cliche, right?

Right and wrong. Because even though — or perhaps especially because — LeGuin is writing for children, her stories are laced with bittersweet truths about "nature red in tooth and claw." These kittens grow up knowing their father only by rumor (the gentle jest that he was a "fly-by-night"), which is perfectly natural for cats ... but has also become increasingly a fact of life for many human children, especially in the city.

And when the catwings reach the woods outside the city, they find that life isn't all that much safer — an encounter with an owl fills them with as much terror as they ever felt in town. The one who is injured never really gets better and remains somewhat crippled. The kittens themselves aren't "nice" — they catch and kill mice and fish to survive. And when they find their mother, she's doing just fine by herself; it's nice to see the kits again, of course, but now they can just run along because she's living her own rather

comfortable life now.

Yet even though LeGuin's stories are not sentimentalized, neither do they shock or brutalize in their truthfulness. Rather, as she makes danger and loss and injury and fear and all the passages of life seem natural and unavoidable, LeGuin also lets us see that life can *still* be well-lived, and individuals can *still* act rightly and lovingly and bravely, and can bear with dignity whatever losses come. Not a bad set of truths for children to learn in a couple of gentle, well-told tales.

Wizard's Hall, Jane Yolen, ill. Trina Schart Hyman (HBJ, cloth, 133pp, \$13.95)

Eleven-year-old Henry is a kid who isn't particularly good at anything, and has no particular ambitions in life. Like most kids, he has passing fancies about what he'd like to be — but to his surprise, when he mentions the idea of maybe becoming a wizard, his normally complacent mother seizes on the idea and packs him off to study at *Wizard's Hall*.

There Henry finds himself immediately out of his depth. He's the newest student, of course, and because his arrival completes the total of 113 students that the magisters were looking for, he will *always* be the newest. They take

away his name and call him Thornmallow because he's "prickly on the outside and squishy on the inside," and then proceed to make it plain that he lacks even the most rudimentary talents that wizards must have in order to do well. He also has a habit of blurting things out and making spectacular mistakes.

But he does have a few friends, and when it comes to his schooling, he *tries*, which may — or may not — be enough.

Yolen writes with great charm and wit, so that while the book is never riotously funny, it is amusing from the start. She also has a knack for finding the telling detail, so that the story is believable even at its most strange, and the bad guy who shows up at the end (along with a marvelously inventive and scary "quilt beast") is a powerful and compelling figure indeed.

The only trouble with Yolen's style is that its tone of cleverness and brashness — which make it so pleasant to read — can also cause us to keep our distance from Henry. Instead of finding ourselves inside his head and heart, we are at one remove; we watch him when, for the story to have its greatest power, it might have been better if we could have felt ourselves to *be* him.

But perhaps it's enough to *like* Henry Thornmallow, and to enjoy

his story. Certainly at the end, where he finds himself almost alone in facing the enemy, after watching terrible things happen to the people he most likes and admires, the book fulfils every promise and becomes quite a strong mythic tale.

Don't Care High, Gordon Korman, (Scholastic/Point, paper, 243 pp, young adult fiction, \$2.95)

Technically I suppose that *Don't Care High* isn't really fantasy — that is, there's no magic, or at least none that is *called* magic. Rather it's a fantasy the way *Ferris Beuller's Day Off* was a fantasy — you know that reality doesn't actually work this way — but you wish it did!

Paul Abrams has just moved to New York City from Saskatoon, and finds himself in a high school named for Don Carey, the man who devised New York's sewer system. The students at Don Carey are spectacularly uninterested in education, so much so that the school has earned the nickname "Don't Care High."

How little do they care? There hasn't been a student body president in decades, because nobody runs. The football field is in the middle of a freeway interchange but it hardly matters because nobody ever goes out for the team. The students show up for class when they feel

like it, but no one can really say they're late because no one has bothered to synchronize the clocks in the school. No one, not even the teachers, can remember the principal's name.

In other words, this is high school the way it *feels* to most students along about January, when summer is still an infinite distance away and there are no more significant holidays to look forward to.

Then Paul finds himself caught up in the schemes of a new friend named Sheldon, who takes it into his head to nominate for student body president a kid named Mike Otis, who is spectacular in his indifference to high school. Mike barely notices when he wins the election, but Sheldon is having so much fun he can't stop.

As a result, Paul and Sheldon, putting Mike Otis's name on everything they do, end up spurring the whole school into action — making a massive science project, fielding an inspired girls' basketball team, breaking the spirit of the student who, in finest mafia style has taken over control of the school's lockers, and finally waging a campaign of nonviolent resistance to the vice-principal's decision to remove Mike Otis as student body president.

Not one thing that happens in the story is believable. And yet Korman juxtaposes his fantasy high

school events with "real-world" events like a garbage strike and learning to drive in New York City — a deft reminder, whenever we need one, that this fantasy isn't all that strange compared to what really goes on in the Big Apple. And Mike Otis himself remains an enigma, a figure even more mythical and strange than the image Sheldon and Paul create for him.

There are no serious social commentaries here — racial tension and poverty, for instance, never even come up. And yet Korman *does* manage to deal quite well with the idea of political power. Where it comes from, how it's used, and how easily people are manipulated despite their best efforts at remaining completely uninvolved! Best of all, the book is funny and imaginative, and anybody who doesn't enjoy it is a stick-in-the-mud.

"GenreCon," the Preconference on Genres of the Young Adult Services Division of the American Library Association (27-28 June, Atlanta)

I know, this is a book review column, not at all the place to do conference reports. But I do talk about science fiction and fantasy for children and young adults from time to time, and I thought you'd be interested in what the young adult librarians are doing. After all, most

of us discovered science fiction and fantasy during our teens (or even earlier), and if you're like me, you discovered it as much through what was on the shelves of the school library or the public library as through anything you found in the bookstore.

First, you might want to know that the YASD of the ALA (see the heading for a translation) has come up with some valuable lists of books especially recommended for young adults in each of several genres. While the lists of Sports, Humor, Romance, and Mystery are also interesting. I thought you'd be most interested in knowing what is being recommended in Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror. Some of the titles are exactly what you'd expect — or even hope for! Others, though, will steer you to books and authors you may not have read before. And as you read these lists, keep in mind that many librarians — especially those who *don't* read much in our genres — will make purchasing decisions based on these lists!

Science Fiction: Mildred Ames, *Anna to the Infinite Power*; Ayn Rand, *Anthem*; Robert A. Heinlein, *Citizens of the Galaxy*; Anne McCaffrey, *Dragonsong*; a book of mine; Piers Anthony, *Ghost*; Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*; William Sleator, *Interstellar Pig*; Ursula K. LeGuin,

The Left Hand of Darkness; David Brin, *Postman*; Janet Kagan, *Uhura's Song*; Lois McMaster Bujold, *The Warrior's Apprentice*.

A few more books, not officially on the list, are also recommended: Andre Norton, *Catseye*; Pamela Sargent, *Earthseed*; David Palmer, *Emergence*; William Sleator, *House of Stairs*; Joan D. Vinge, *Psion*; H.M. Hoover, *Rains of Eridan*; Paula Danzinger, *This Place Has No Atmosphere*; Robert C. O'Brien, *Z for Zachariah*.

Some surprises — a Star Trek novel? Well, I told you long ago that Janet Kagan had made hers something special! An Ayn Rand novel — especially one so little known as *Anthem*! Well, these lists were made by librarians who weren't afraid of the idea of challenging students, and they tried to read all of each other's nominations. Apparently *Anthem* turned out to be persuasive indeed. There are old favorites that I grew up on — the Heinlein and the Norton were among my earliest and most seminal science fiction reading when I was a kid — and wonderful newcomers and books that nobody ever thought of as YA titles until the kids themselves found them.

Horror: Barbara Michaels, *Ammie Come Home*; Clive Barker, *Books of Blood*; Stephen King,

Carrie; Margaret Mahy, *The Change-over*; Dean Koontz, *Darkfall*; Anne Rice, *Interview with the Vampire*; Dean Koontz, *The Mask*; Robert McCammon, *Mystery Walk*; Stephen King, *The Shining*; Ray Bradbury, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*; Lois Duncan, *Summer of Fear*; David Morrell, *The Totem*.

Also recommended: Best of H.P. Lovecraft: *Bloodcurdling Tales of Horror and the Macabre*; Robert Bloch, *Cold Chills: Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allen Poe*; Bram Stoker, *Dracula*; Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*; Whitley Strieber, *The Hunger*; Ira Levin, *Rosemary's Baby*; and John Saul, *The Unwanted*.

Notice that this list contains scarcely any titles that were written for kids. Still, of the ones I've read, the librarians have done a good job of choosing the best — or at least the most highly spoken of. And the also-recommended list seems to cover the old classics fairly well.

Fantasy: Tamora Pierce, *Alanna: The First Adventure*; Lloyd Alexander, *The Book of Three*; Suzy McKee Charnas, *The Bronze King*; Barbara Hambly, *Dragonsbane*; J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*; Robin McKinley, *The Hero and the Crown*; Piers Anthony, *On a Pale Horse*; T.H. White, *The Once and Future King*; Patricia A. McKillip, *The Riddle-*

Master of Hed; a book of mine; Monica Furlong, *Wise Child*; and Ursula K. LeGuin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*.

Also recommended: Grace Chetwin, *Gom on Windy Mountain*; Marion Zimmer Bradley, *Hawk-mistress*; Diana Wynne Jones, *Howl's Moving Castle*; Raymond E. Feist, *Magician: Apprentice*; David Eddings, *Pawn of Prophecy*; Clare Bell, *Ratha's Creature*; Piers Anthony, *A Spell for Chameleon*; and Terry Brooks, *Sword of Shannara*.

Here the also-recommended list seems to have been used for popular series that some of the librarians weren't terribly thrilled with, and for at least one "fantasy" that is, technically, science fiction. But that very question — how Bradley's Darkover books can be fantasy while McCaffrey's Dragon books are sf — came up at what was called a "breakout session" on fantasy, moderated by Di Herald, who also was on the committee of seven that made this list.

One of the most fascinating aspects of that session was a discussion of books that had been nominated for the fantasy list but *didn't* end up getting on. While the list they ended up with is a fine one, with old favorites and wonderful new books well represented, looking at the list of almost-made-its can give you some idea of how hard

these librarians struggled to make their final decisions. For instance, C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* was nominated but didn't make it on; likewise, Peter Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*, Steven Brust's *Iherag*, Stephen R. Donaldson's *Lord Foul's Bane*, Susan Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising*, Margaret Weis's and Tracy Hickman's *Dragon Wing*, and Terry Pratchett's *The Color of Magic*. Why didn't they make it? The simple answer is that they didn't get the votes; but the honest answer for some of them was that, while each had its champions, some also met with resistance from librarians who truly *loathed* the books in question ...

Still, I was delighted that Terry Bisson's brilliant *Talking Man* was noticed and nominated, as was Meredith Pierce's unforgettable *The Woman Who Loved Reindeer*. Elizabeth Scarborough's Nebula-winning *The Healer's War* met some resistance because it wasn't fantasy enough. (Go figure!) And as for R.A. McAvoy, she certainly had enough votes to get on the list a couple of times over — but her votes were split among *many* titles — *Book of Kells*, *Damiano*, *The Grey Horse*, *Tea with the Black Dragon* — and no one book ended up with enough votes to make the cut!

So there were frustrations with

what got left off as well as what got put on these lists. Yet there is no doubt that the librarians who composed the lists cared very much about the genres they were representing, and have strong and fascinating ideas about what makes a book "good." Just as important to me, as I listened to the conversation of these librarians who had paid an extra \$165, often out of their own pockets, to attend this preconference on genres, I realized that they are keenly aware of what speculative literature is for. Fantasy, they pointed out, is perhaps the only genre where there seems to be no barrier between adult and young adult fiction. While kids will often break into the adult section, it seems to be only in fantasy that adults are just as ready to reach into the children's and YA sections to find books to read and love. They also affirmed, from their direct observation, what we have long suspected — that fantasy and science fiction attract the best and the brightest of the youthful readers.

I left that breakout session with a great deal of trust in the librarians who are, for many young readers, the first guides to point the way into the world of speculative literature. And I couldn't wait to pass along their lists to you — if only to start you arguing about other titles that should have been there!

Ardath Mayhar has written hundreds of short stories, articles and books. Her work on writing has appeared in a variety of publications, and she teaches fiction writing for the Writer's Digest School. "The Adapter" is a cross-genre story. Part science fiction, part fantasy, the story focuses on magic, the future, and hope.

The Adapter

By Ardath Mayhar

HE LEANED AGAINST a steel post, watching the stream of traffic purl down the interstate. He wasn't supposed to be there, of course. Signs at every ramp warned pedestrians and riders of small two-wheelers to stay off the artery, but the ancient Indian had never bothered to learn to read. That was white man's magic, not worth the effort.

He had chosen a spot beside an on-ramp, so that anyone so inclined could stop and pick him up. Not that he minded walking — his long, skinny legs had covered more miles of the desert and the mountain countries than most of the vehicles that passed him. But he had an errand to finish, and that was the quickest way to his destination.

An eighteen-wheeler passed the post with a gooselike hoot of warning. The wrinkles about the Indian's eyes grew even deeper, as he visualized blowouts on a dozen of those eighteen tires carrying the monster out of his sight.

Then he smiled. Someplace along about the middle of the Mojave,

that trucker was going to have an interesting time of it.

"Sam!" The voice was inside his mind, nagging. "Samuel Rainbird! You tend to your business and let white men alone!"

That was his mother, of course, who was now so old that he suspected her of growing younger again. She knew what he was doing, with an unerring certainty that always startled him. Women's magic was in all ways alien to men's, and he now, in his later years, understood it to be equally potent. Just different.

He sighed and straightened, as a long, sleek car pulled over off the roadway and the man driving it gestured for him to get in. He whacked his arms against his sides to remove what dust he could, for he hated to soil the immaculate white leather of the interior.

"Much 'bliged," he said, folding his legs beneath the low dash and taking off his high-crowned hat, which couldn't fit under the top. "Name's Sam. Sam Rainbird. Goin' to Salt Flats, up ahead a way."

The man looked him over, excitement shining in his pale eyes. "I'm Edward Lesserthal. Glad to help. And I'll watch out for the sign for Salt Flats."

Sam almost smiled, which might have cracked his wrinkled face into a thousand slivers. Why was it that an old Indian was so intriguing to the whites? But he kept his composure and nodded.

A sign? For Salt Flats? The thought made him chuckle, deep inside where nobody could hear. Who would read it, even if there were anybody there who knew the white man's symbols?

"I tell you when. Salt Flats's too small to have a sign. Off the road." He settled back against the chilly leather, glad to be out of the sun and the blowing dust.

He stared out of the window, seeing a hawk circling high in the leached-pale sky. He could have used him, of course, but flying never had been his best magic. No, this was the way. He closed his eyes and stared at the picture inside his spirit: The pale man with pale eyes and black hair, moving his hands so competently on the wheel, guided this magical missile down the interstate as if on a cushion of air. Perfect.

He almost dozed off, lulled by the coolness of the conditioned air and the quiet purr of the engine. He half-dreamed of his mother, waiting for the tough gray herb he would find there, impatient for his return so that she could finish her work. The roar as they passed another eighteen-wheeler woke him fully.

Beyond the window and the fence beside the highway, he saw a small herd of buffalo, grazing on the scanty grass. He could become that huge bull — but hauling that weight across rough country was no work for an old man. He closed his eyes again.

He felt Salt Flats coming up, long miles before it was time to tell the man to slow down for the stop. The narrow slip of salt, running away into the sandstone gully, had its own voice, and the odd little plants that survived there possessed unique traces of their own, tightly woven into the fabric of the dry country. It was like walking into a web of magics, feeling the tingles across his face and the small energies inside his bones.

If his errand had been less urgent and his mother less demanding, he would have become this man, driven on to whatever goal was contained in that oval skull, perhaps lived his life for a time, as he had done with others of the pale-eyed people. He knew more about the white man than any others among his own kind, for he had been so many of them.

Of course, when that happened, the real person had to be dealt with, which was a pity but a rule of nature. It was dangerous to have two of the same individual wandering the world. It led to bad magics of all sorts.

But as Salt Flats drew nearer, he felt something there. Something stronger than anything he had ever found among the whites or even his own people. Beyond the ridge that contained the gully, there was a new kind. A new magic.

His eyes opened, and he said, "Here. The next good place. And much 'bliged."

"Right." The pale-eyed man slowed the powerful machine to a halt along the graveled shoulder. "You can get over the fence all right?"

Sam nodded. "No problem. Good trip to you."

As the beautiful car pulled away, he found a moment to regret losing the chance at it. But then he felt that tug again . . . the fascination with the unknown that had been with him all his life. He waited until there was no vehicle near enough to see what he did. Then he became a grasshopper and bounced through the mesh of the fence.

Once beyond it, he resumed his own shape, though he was growing weary of its aches and limitations, in these latter years. He would like, he thought, to find some shape that was so efficient, so usable, so interesting that he could take it permanently, leaving his mother to nag her daughters instead of her single son.

She would look for him, with her curse all sharpened and ready, in the shape she knew. She did not know about all those others that had been his, and so she would never place the magic where it could harm him.

He chuckled deep inside, his face straight and stern still, as he strode off to the shining white pan that was Salt Flats. The gray herb his mother required was there, but he didn't pause or slow his pace. He must see what hid beyond the ridge, for that was something he knew that he had longed, without knowing it, to see.

When he came to the narrowing of the gully, he became a lizard and flowed up the stony wall, skittering through pockets of dust and climbing with suckered feet the smooth faces of rock. At the top, he chose a boulder large enough to conceal him, for the lizard mind did not have the capacity to learn what he wanted to know, and became himself again.

There was a small valley there, a mere pocket in the gray-tan sand and stone of the countryside. In the middle sat a vehicle that didn't look at all like the Porsche in which he had arrived. It was rounded, smooth, and a ladder of sorts leaned between a round opening and the dust of the valley floor.

That was interesting, but it was not nearly so fascinating as the creatures who were scrambling in and out, measuring with odd instruments, and picking up stones and putting them into shiny bottles. They were stranger than anything he had ever dreamed, even after chewing Dreamweed.

They, too, were round, heads set upon rounded shoulders set upon rounded bellies, set upon podgy legs. Their faces were partially concealed behind transparent blue hoods, which covered them to the shoulders.

He crouched behind the boulder, watching and watching, feeling within himself the pull of those odd shapes, the odder vehicle, and the tense field of magical energy that surrounded them all. He had to get closer . . . to see them more clearly.

"Sam!" His mother's angry thought interrupted him. "You get those leaves and get back here!"

He knew in that moment that he would never go back at all. He had lived for seventy summers as her son and helper, but now he was going to become his own person. He wanted to ride in that round thing down there. He wanted to know what those shiny instruments did. He wanted to learn a new magic.

What pleasure was there in being a hawk or a grasshopper or a buffalo for the hundredth time? Or even a white man, who was infinitely less interesting than a grasshopper?

He became a lizard again and slithered down the long slope until he was very near the round ship. As one of the crew headed off into a maze of fallen boulders lining the farther wall of the valley, Sam-the-lizard skittered after him.

He caught him in a pocket of rock, and it took only a moment to feel out the workings of this other sort of creature and to counterfeit it with his own body. The being turned around and froze in shock, seeing itself standing there, blue hood and all.

"Much 'bliged," said Sam Rainbird, and hit him with a rock.

He would have to watch those skulls. They were awfully thin. He changed his internal pattern a bit, even while he pulled the dead spaceman into a cranny and filled it in with rock and sand to hide the body. Anyone hoping to down *him* with a rock now would be disappointed.

Then, feeling his way through the channels of this new brain, this fresh set of skills and abilities, he took up the instrument dropped by his victim. Ah. These dials — they showed mineral content of the rock. And these showed water and veins of ore far below the surface beneath his feet.

Filled with the joy of discovery, he completed the assignment contained in his duplicate of the creature's mind and turned. The ship waited. Other worlds waited.

He might forget, in time, that he had ever been Sam Rainbird, but he suspected that before he was done, he might become creatures that he had never dreamed existed. Smiling, his new round face uncracked by the expression, he strode back to his new life and a sky full of unexplored worlds.



New writer Wendy Council lives in San Francisco where she "walks up and down hills, sits on beaches, eats Chinese food, and enjoys the occasional earthquake." Her urban homelife couldn't be more different than the rural setting she so aptly depicts in "Black Handkerchiefs."

Black Handkerchiefs

By Wendy Council

MY SISTER PLAYS in the bluegrass band up at the front of the room. I can hear the blood singing in the strings of her fiddle as she drives the band along home to the end of "Jerusalem Ridge." Her eyes are fixed on the bow as if she could squeeze the music out of those strings with only the strength of her will. In the glare of the makeshift stage lights, the muscles on her bow arm dance about in sharp relief.

The final notes fade, and the audience stands and cheers for one of the best bluegrass tunes ever written, heedless of the racket they're causing, not caring for a moment if the noise brings the militia thundering down into the tiny church basement. As the crowd cheers, the drummer and the bass player exchange one of those secret, satisfied smiles musicians save for each other. Linda waits for the people to start settling back down into their chairs, then raises her bow to cue the downbeat of the next tune.

I recognize the opening chords to the ballad from hearing them so often at home while she has been writing the song. The words of the chorus drift back over the heads of the crowd:

*The song cannot be torn from our land
It's the vein that can ne'er be bled.
We'll sing to the grave; we'll sing and we'll wave
Black handkerchiefs for our dead.*

I touch my own black scarf, tucked into the pocket of my blouse and knotted around Tommy's wedding ring, and wish that he were alive to hear the new piece.

He had loved my sister's music: a long time ago, when we were all still in white school, I had accused him of coming around our house on the weekends just so he could hear Linda practice at home. He had looked surprised, then indignant . . . and then, for the first time, he had kissed me.

The number ends, and the people around me start to clap — not as wild as before, but loud and long — and I steal the opportunity to swipe my knuckle at a fat tear gathering in the corner of my right eye. Damn it, won't the pain of losing Tommy ever go away? He wouldn't want me made feeble by grief; he would tell me to stay strong and to keep fighting for the cause.

The band whips through a lively sixteen bars of their theme song — also one of Linda's — and calls for a break.

"Can I get you something to drink?" The question comes from the man who has been sitting to my right during the first set, a big, quiet bear of a fellow who seems to be here alone.

The floor is crowded with people going for drinks, finding the rest rooms, standing and talking in small groups. No way to easily navigate the wheelchair through that mess. "Thank you kindly," I say. "A root beer." I've heard that Brother Walker made the root beer from fresh sassafras, so it's guaranteed to get me hazily high. I could stand some cheer right now; I don't mind at all that I need a drink to acquire the feeling. I reach for my satchel to get coins, but the fellow waves me still, then smiles shyly and lumbers away from the table.

As I'm watching his head weave through the crowd, Linda comes up. "A new friend?" Though she makes it sound like a tease, I hear the thoughtfulness behind her words. I shrug and say, "Could be."

Linda: the red-faced baby brought into our home by old Joella the midwife when I was three years old, the wide-eyed younger sister I didn't mind looking out for at all, the one for whom I begged and borrowed to buy a harmonica when she turned eight. But since my time in jail, she often is the older one, the protector. It makes me angry and proud and sad all at once to see our roles swapped like this.

She swings her leg over the seat of the folding chair the big fellow just left and settles down facing backward, her powerful forearms folded over the rigid wooden back. "How are we doing?" she says.

"The band?" I lean forward and speak softly, so only she can hear. "Perfect, and you know it."

"Do you think the new song went over O.K.?" She's always nervous about performing something for the first time. Though I don't know why. She spends weeks and weeks perfecting each tune before she sings it in public — she studies old bluegrass scores back from the 20th century; she frets and mutters endlessly over each note and each word.

I touch her arm. "It went over fine. They love your music, Linda. It keeps them strong." Nothing but the complete truth. The fight to regain our piece of America is as dependent on Linda's songs, and on others' poems and tracts, as it is on the flow of weapons up from the Gulf.

The big fellow comes back with three drinks — one for me, one for himself, and the third for Linda. "I noticed you come over and sit down. I thought you might like a glass."

"Thank you," she says, standing up and offering him his chair back.

"No, you go ahead." I feel a mite nervous with him towering over my shoulder — what is he, six feet eight? — and swivel my chair so I'm facing him. "Luke," he says, pointing to his own chest.

She settles down in the chair again. "I'm Linda, and this here is my sister Melanie."

He displays a lopsided grin. "I know that. The movement's greatest musician and one of its living heroes? — everybody knows you two."

Linda and I exchange a quick glance. For all that she likes to hear that people enjoy her music, we both tire of those who only want to know us because we're "famous." That's part of what keeps us so close, I think: in each other we can see through the public symbol to the woman behind it. Not many other people can.

"You enjoying the show?" I ask him.

He nods. "It's not often I get to hear professional musicians. Though, of course, every little bar band sings 'If Only.'"

"If Only" is Linda's best-known song, a song that asks what our lives would be like if history had gone differently: if only Red Slavery hadn't been outlawed, if only Indians hadn't prospered so, maybe if we'd driven them into the desert to die, if only we hadn't lost the Great War to the Japs, if only we still owned America. . . . It is an anthem for the homeland movement.

Linda gives him a smile for the compliment, but he's looking at me. Arlin, the steel guitarist, comes up and entices Linda away to the stage to look at a pedal that's sticking on him.

Luke arranges himself back in the chair, and we talk about music for a while. He makes me laugh with a story about secretly trying to learn to play the guitar when he was a boy. We're still laughing when the band starts their next set.

When they take their break, Luke has gone to refill both our drinks. Linda comes up to join me and is complaining about how unseasonably warm it is, even in this basement, when Luke comes back.

"I didn't know if this was your regular weather or not. Never gotten this far east before."

"Whereabouts you from, Luke?" Linda says.

"Cahokia." The Indian name for the region makes Linda frown.

"You mean Missouri, don't you?" I say.

"Part of Southern Illinois, actually. The hills right to the east of the Great River."

"Don't people over yonder use the American names?" she says, her jaw muscles tight around the words.

He shrugs. "Sometimes." He takes a drink, and half the liquid in the clouded plastic glass disappears. "Mighty tasty," he says. "Is it lawful around these parts?"

"If a body worried about doing only what's lawful, she'd hardly do nothing but breathe," I say.

He chuckles at that. "True enough."

"And this would be the wrong place to be," Linda points out, serious as death. "You know there's a interdiction against the non-Red arts nowadays. Just being at this here show could get us all thrown in jail for a month."

"Us for a month, and you for a year," I say. Worry wells up in me like

water in a marsh, not for myself so much as for Linda. She ain't never been in the jails for more than a night. And, even though they say nothing will ever happen again like it did to me and Tommy, I don't believe them. The Tribal Consortium lies through their teeth all the time, and who can stop them? Nobody. Like nobody could stop them from hurting Tommy.

"Mel?" It's Linda. "You O.K.?"

"Fine." I take a swig of the root beer, pressing my eyes shut until I swallow; I keep the cool glass in my hand, holding tight to its sweating sides. I open my eyes to stare into the brown liquid. "You're right," I say to Luke. "It is a good batch."

There's a moment of silence, just long enough to begin to feel uncomfortable, before Linda asks him, "You here in Kentucky visiting? Have people out this way?"

"No," he says. "I'm on my way to Kittamaque-ink. I should have been back on the road this morning, but I heard about your band playing tonight and decided I couldn't afford to miss the chance to hear you do your own songs."

"People play many of them over in Illinois?" I ask.

"Surely do —"

But Linda, suddenly, is not in the mood to hear praise. "Why you in a hurry to get to old Washington?" she interrupts; her eyes narrowed and mean.

He looks straight at her. "For the Peace Conference. I'm second representative for Cahokie in the talks."

"Peace talks is a waste," she says. "No Injun is ever going to just hand us back our country, are they?"

"No," he says. "Not likely."

"Then why talk about it? There's only one way to make us quit fighting, and that's to give us back our land."

A voice pipes up from behind me. "That's right." I realize then, some folks at the crowded table have overheard the last few exchanges, and one wants to add his two cents' worth.

"But the war doesn't do anybody any good," says Luke. "I believe if both sides work very hard at it, that we can find some compromise —"

"No compromises," I say, unable to keep myself from speaking my mind any longer. "Would you compromise about owning your own land? Would you compromise about having the right to teach our own children

the history of our people in our own schools? Would you forget all the wrong they've done us?"

"We done them wrong, too," he says, quiet and intense. "For hundreds of years before the Second World War changed things around."

A man behind Linda who's been listening shouts out: "What are you? Some sort of Injun lover?"

"I don't hate 'em or love 'em," Luke says. "I try to understand."

"You understand shooting children?" I say. "You understand conscription camps? You understand being made to tell them about secret plots you don't know anything about? You understand losing the people you love?" Luke watched me impassively. "Then you understand all you need to."

There is silence while he and I stare at each other. I find myself gripping the arms of my wheelchair so hard that my hands throb. I force myself to loosen my hold. The crowd of people listening has grown to a circle two or three deep. In my peripheral vision, I recognize Jed, who lost both his children in the bombing of a school that they blamed on us. There is quiet Marnie, who used to come to the rallies where Tommy spoke. I don't know whom she wore her black handkerchief for, but she was always in the front of the crowd, waving it frantically at the end of each speech.

I know what happened," Luke finally says. "And I'm sorry. But that was almost ten years ago. We've made a lot of progress since then."

"Progress!" says Linda. "We still can't run for office. We can't even vote for anything but our own representatives, and they got no power at all."

"It's slow," he says. "It's awful slow, but we're getting somewhere. The Tribes don't have the support from the Japanese like they used to. They've made too many mistakes. The water has changed its course and there's no stopping it."

"And there's still far more of us than there is of them," Linda says. "Why struggle for some false equality when we can just take everything back over by force?"

"Yeah," adds another voice I can't place. Other people chime in their agreement.

"Because we lose our support when we stoop to terrorism," he says. His voice is still steady, though everybody else is all het up.

"Terrorism is their word," I say. "It's what they call it when we try to

defend our rights."

He looks right at me with clear gray eyes. There's the tiniest of worry creases between his eyebrows. And something in his look that tells me he really sees me — not the symbol, but Melanie — that it's me he's talking to.

"This fellow can't seem to help using their words." Another voice from the crowd I can't place.

"Maybe he's some sort of spy," yells a woman.

Luke shakes his head, not breaking eye contact with me. Around us there are a dozen voices shouting angry words. The circle tightens.

"No," I say. Then, louder: "No!" The people begin to fall silent. "I don't think he's one of them."

He nods at me, starts to say something — probably agreement, or maybe to thank me, but I talk right over him.

"But he's not one of us, either," I say, knowing it for the truth.

"Then why is he here?" asks Linda. She stands and plucks at his sleeve. "Why don't you just leave and get on your way to those peace talks?" The way she says "peace" makes it sound like a curse.

Hands begin to push him toward the door, and he shrugs them off and walks, standing straight, still towering over most of the heads in the crowd. Even so, I lose sight of him quick enough.

"You think he's gonna tell the militia about us?" Linda asks me. "Should somebody stay with him to the edge of town?" There are anxious faces behind her awaiting my judgment.

"No," I tell her. "I think he's just what he says he is. And just what I say he is, too." I have a clear idea of what it takes to be a real American. It isn't just fighting for our freedom; it isn't just having a lot to gain. It is having something to avenge. Like my time, eight years ago, in the conscription camps for political prisoners.

Once a week, for more than a month, they had tied Tommy to a chair so he could see while they gagged me, then strapped me to a table. With a power saw, they had taken my feet. They used an anesthetic at my spine, so it didn't hurt much at first, but I could still see. I watched them mutilate me; I heard the rasping of the blade as it cut through my bones. Later, as the drug wore off, I lay in a filthy bunk in the camp infirmary and fought the pain, fought it but lost, screaming and screaming until I was hoarse. They gave me antibiotics and fed me through my arms, and

marched Tommy in every day to look at me.

A week later they had cut off another hunk of my legs. Each week they took another few inches, like they were cutting steaks off a buffalo; Tommy had to watch each time, crying and denying he knew about anything more than making speeches and organizing rallies. Until he couldn't stand it anymore. Until he made up where some American weapons were stockpiled so they'd stop hurting me.

When they went to where he said and found out he had been lying, they shot him. When I heard the guns that day, my whole body went cold with fear. I never got to see his body; I never got to say good-bye.

They released me soon after, paid for doctors, but claimed that my legs had been removed because of gangrene. Some big chief politico came to me in the hospital and handed me Tommy's wedding band. It had been all I could do not to throw it back in his ugly flat face.

I sit up straight in my wheelchair and I say to my sister, "Go on. I'm fine. You get back up there and sing with all your heart." The stranger is gone, and people are starting to go back to their seats.

I couldn't fight the pain back in the camp, but I can fight it now. I'll not cry, not ever again. I'll stay strong. For Linda, for my memory of Tommy, for me. For our lost country; for the America that lives on in church basements like these.



John Morressy returns to these pages with a lovely fantasy story. His last tale for us, "Timekeeper" (January 1990), was just reprinted in The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling for St. Martin's Press.

A Tale of Three Wizards

By John Morressy

THE WORLD IS a dangerous and uncertain place for wizards as it is for everyone else, and every wizard has learned that the lower one's profile, the safer one's skin. Except at conventions, or gatherings of the guild, wizards do not openly proclaim their professional status. When they meet in public places, they do not even exchange greetings. They avert their eyes and proceed on their way in silence.

This makes for a lonely life. So it was only natural that Hithernils, treasurer of the Wizards' Guild, finding himself in the presence of a colleague under propitious circumstances, took advantage of the opportunity. As a rule, Hithernils maintained a profile so low it was practically concave, but he had had a surfeit of solitude and wanted to enjoy a chat with someone who could understand and appreciate what he had to say. He was, in truth, bursting with eagerness to talk about spells: he was on his way home from working a very intricate spell for a local nobleman, and doing so with great success. Having suffered a number of embarrassing

misspellings in recent years, he was all the more eager to boast of a triumph.

His fellow wizard, who was the only other patron at the inn on this blustery night, was a stranger to Hithernils. Though he sported an elegant white beard, he was young — scarcely past his second century, and that was early years for a wizard — and he had an intelligent expression, a decisive manner, and well-cut garments. Hithernils was about to hail him, when the man approached his table and bowed profoundly.

"My greetings, Master. It is seldom that one meets an honored officer of the guild under such circumstances. Allow me to pay my respects," he said in a subdued voice.

"Well, thank you, my good man, thank you very much. I was just about to . . . would you care to join me?"

"You do me an undeserved honor, Master," said the other, bowing again.

"Not at all, dear chap. As you say, one so seldom has the chance for a leisurely discussion of professional matters. One gets lonesome at times."

"Ours is a solitary calling," said the other, seating himself opposite Hithernils and adding, when he was seated, "More solitary for some of us than for others."

"Ah yes, yes. Solitary indeed. What with barbarians, and disgruntled warlords, and alchemists, one sometimes feels like . . . like an outcast."

"An outcast," repeated the other, and paused as if pondering the term. "Well put, Master. Very aptly put, indeed. And all the more reason to celebrate this meeting. Allow me to call for a flagon of our host's best wine."

"Oh, well now, really, that would be. . . ."

"It would be my pleasure and my honor. You will find it an amusing little wine, Master, even for such a sophisticated palate as your own: innocent, even maidenly, at first sip, but with a knowing aftertaste that suggests worldly wisdom and perhaps just a touch of naughtiness."

Hithernils gestured with what he hoped was nonchalance and tried to look like a connoisseur of wines, something he was not. To forestall further talk on the subject, which could prove embarrassing, he asked, "However did you know that I'm an officer of the Wizards' Guild?"

"I sensed in the usual way that you are a wizard. A glimpse of your medallion informed me that you are a member of the guild. It was your

presence, your bearing — your aura, if I may use the word — that convinced me that you hold a position of responsibility.”

Tucking the telltale medallion inside his tunic, Hithernils said, “You’re very perceptive. I am the treasurer.”

“Master Hithernils! I have heard much of you,” said the other in a voice hushed with deference.

“Have you really? How very nice to know. And you, my good fellow — I don’t believe you mentioned your name.”

Humbly lowering his eyes, the man waved the question aside. “My name is of no consequence. Ah, but the Wizards’ Guild . . . it is a subject of endless fascination to me,” he said, looking up with an eager light in his eyes. “And, I confess, the object of a long-standing ambition.”

“Would you be a member?”

“To be accepted into the guild would be the pinnacle of my life’s achievement. As yet I can only study, and work, and hope that someday, when I have proven myself worthy of that fellowship . . . but tell me, Master, what is it like to be a member?”

Flattery made Hithernils talkative. The wine made him positively garrulous. When the evening came to a befuddled end, and Hithernils rose unsteadily to his feet, he was hoarse from hours of almost uninterrupted talk. He had boasted of his spelling prowess, dropped names shamelessly, and hinted at magical undertakings of blood-chilling complexity and peril. All this was harmless enough, if somewhat *infra dig*. But he had also revealed to his fascinated acquaintance more about the Wizards’ Guild and its doings than most of its members knew, as well as several things that no member — including Hithernils himself in more judicious moments — would have wanted anyone, especially an outsider, to know. And while he was not altogether certain what he had said, and how circumstantial his account had been, he sank into sleep that night with the uneasy feeling that he had said far more than he should have.

He awoke next morning in physical and mental distress. His head felt as if a coven of low-class witches were holding their Sabbath inside it. The taste in his mouth suggested that their familiars had lodged in it overnight, and left without cleaning up. His stomach emitted impromptu squeaks and gurgles. The memory of indiscreet blabbering added shame to discomfort. This promised to be a bad day.

When he finally made his cautious way to the main room of the inn, he

was greeted with good news. His last night's acquaintance had departed in the early hours: there would be no need to face him. Hithernils received his bill. It included, besides the other wizard's expenses, the price of two large flagons of the best wine. As he opened his mouth to protest the charge, the innkeeper pointed to the foot of the bill. There, in script that was unmistakably his, albeit a bit wavery, was authorization for the charges. Under it was his signature.

He paid without argument, and resolved never to mention this awkward incident to anyone. He kept his resolution.

His companion of the previous evening, whose name was Grizziscus, was in a cheerful mood. The sky was overcast, the wind was cutting, and intermittent sprinkles of cold rain swept the woodlands and made the trail slippery, but in Grizziscus's heart, the sun was high and birds were singing. All was well in the world at last, and he had no doubt that it would soon be even better.

For five long years, ever since he had been refused membership in the Wizards' Guild, Grizziscus had sought the reason for his rejection. Until last night, he had been frustrated at every turn. But now he knew. And not only had he learned the name of his nemesis, he had learned it in a way that was certain to embarrass and discomfort still another guild member, and this one an official. Better and better, he told himself as he rode through the chill rain, humming merrily.

He arrived home on the third day following, soaked from head to foot, mud from the waist down, sniffing and coughing. His faithful servant met him at the door with a dry robe over his arm, warm slippers in one hand, and a steaming posset in the other. Grizziscus kicked off his boots, dropped his cloak to the flagstones, where it landed with a sodden splurp, and shucked off his clinging garments. Wrapped in the fleecy robe, he took up the posset cup in both hands to sniff and then drink.

"I've learned what I was after, Martin. It was Belsheer," he said after his first sip.

"Well done, Master," said the servant.

After another sip, Grizziscus went on, "That silly, nattering old fool mounted a campaign to keep me out. Told them I was practically an alchemist. Turned them against me."

"Dreadful, Master. If you'd care to be seated, I shall dry your feet."

"I had quite forgotten about my feet. They're numb," said the wizard,

settling on the bench and extending his damp and reddened feet. "Do you know, I did not receive a single vote? I was blackballed unanimously."

"A shocking revelation, Master. Scandalous behavior on the part of intelligent wizards," said Martin, fitting a slipper.

"And the worst part of it is that I've never laid eyes on Belsheer, nor he on me." Grizziscus drank deeply and set the empty cup on the floor beside him. He wiped his lips, and then he chuckled deeply and slowly and said, "But I'll soon change that."

Martin paused in fitting the other slipper to look up and ask, "A confrontation, Master? It is wise to risk an open clash?"

"My slipper, Martin," said the wizard, pointing to that article of footwear. "There will be no confrontation, no clash of magics. I have other plans for . . . let us refer to him in the future as B. Simply B."

Comfortably warm and dry, Grizziscus went directly to his workroom to search his spelling books for something appropriate. He was in no hurry; having waited this long to learn the reason for his humiliation, he was willing to be patient a little longer in order to devise a fitting mode of retaliation.

As he had told Martin, he had plans for Belsheer; but as yet they were only general. Belsheer was going to be turned into something small and humiliating — that much was certain. Exactly what ignominious creature it would be remained to be determined.

The first thing to do was to locate Belsheer, and do it discreetly. Summer was nearly over by the time Grizziscus learned the old wizard's whereabouts: he was visiting the castle of a petty king who had been cursed by a witch and who had then foolishly called in an alchemist to remove the curse. The alchemist, of course, had only made things worse, and Belsheer had been summoned to undo the damage. His work done, he was returning to his house in early autumn by a trail Grizziscus knew well. Here, Grizziscus resolved, his vengeance would begin.

THE TRAIL was empty; the sun was warm; the horse's hooves beat a slow, soothing rhythm on the hard-packed surface. Belsheer rode half-asleep down the last long stretch before the fork that led to the orad into the mountains, and home. He felt good. It had been a long time since he had been called out on an emergency, and a longer time since he had undone a multilayered and many-faceted curse, but everything

had gone off without a hitch. His memory was still good; his magic still worked; he could still find his way without a guide, and fend for himself on the road. For a man of nearly five hundred, he was in great shape. There were wizards half his age who could not have helped King What's His Name, or even known where to begin.

No doubt about it, he told himself: experience shows. The only trouble is that it takes so long to get enough, and by the time you do, you're so stiff and achy and forgetful that all you want to do is sit in a comfortable chair by the fire and look at picture books.

He thought of his comfortable chair, and his fireplace, and home. The memories were so pleasant that he drifted into a reverie, and then into a daze. The next thing he knew, he was flat on his back, the breath knocked out of him, staring up into the anxious face of a stranger.

"Gracious Master, are you all right? No bones broken? Nothing dislocated?" the stranger asked, kneeling by his side.

Belsheer gingerly patted ribs, then arms, then thighs. He rolled his head from side to side. He waggled his feet. Nothing hurt any more than usual. "Must have fallen," he said thoughtfully.

"A dreadful fall, Master. I feared the worst."

"Just stunned, that's all," said Belsheer. He raised his head. At once the stranger slipped a supporting arm beneath him to cradle his head and shoulder.

"Rise cautiously, Master. Permit me to assist you," he said.

With many a grunt and groan, Belsheer regained his feet. He rubbed the small of his back, then his shoulder, then gave a long sigh of relief. "Could have been worse," he said. He looked about, puzzled, then asked the stranger, "Were we traveling together? I can't seem to recall. There was somebody with me; I'm sure of it."

"Only your horse, master."

"Oh yes. Yes, my horse. That's right," Belsheer said. Suddenly he threw up his arms and cried, "Where's my horse!?"

"He must have wandered off. Wait here, good Master, and I will bring him back," said the stranger, guiding Belsheer to a soft bank by the side of the trail, and then mounting his own mare and setting off at a lope. He returned in a short time, leading Belsheer's horse, which he tied to a sapling. "I think it would be best if you rest here for a while, Master. If you will do me the honor, I will share my bread and water with you," he said.

"Very kind of you, young fellow," said Belsheer. The man had a white beard, but to Belsheer, everyone was a youngster. Ragged and dusty though the fellow was, he showed good breeding. A nobleman down on his luck, most likely. "What brings you out here?" Belsheer asked.

"I am a homeless wanderer."

"A well-spoken lad like you? With your good manners? That's not right."

"I am disgraced, master. I have been judged by my betters and found wanting."

"You have? Who are these betters, anyway? What right have they got to disgrace a decent young fellow?"

With a wounded countenance, the stranger raised his hands to still Belsheer's angry outburst. "Alas, good Master, they were right to do so, for they are great and mighty wizards. You yourself are one of their number."

"I am? What number? What are you talking about?"

"Are you not the wise and venerable Belsheer, master of the subtle arts and a founding member of the Wizards' Guild?"

Stunned though he was from his fall, Belsheer was still instinctively cautious. "What if I am?"

"Do not deny your dignity, Master. All men know of the Wizards' Guild, and to know of the guild is to know the greatness and wisdom of Belsheer, chief of wizards."

After a moment's reflection, Belsheer said, "I suppose you're right. But who are you? I don't know you. How could I disgrace somebody I don't even know?"

"I am Grizziscus," said the stranger, covering his eyes and lowering his head.

Belsheer gave a slight start at the name. His memory might have its little lapses from time to time, but the name of Grizziscus came back to him vividly. Slipping one hand behind his back, he worked a quick protective spell. "I seem to recall that name. Weren't you an applicant?"

Grizziscus's voice was hollow. "I was. I received not a single vote."

After a long silence, Belsheer said, "Not one, eh?"

"Not one. But it was a wise and just decision," Grizziscus said, raising his head and looking Belsheer directly in the eye.

"It was?"

"Yes! I was shallow, callow, misguided, foolish. I used my powers irresponsibly. Had I been accepted, I might have brought dishonor upon

the guild. Far better that I wander the roads and byways, an outcast spurned by all, begging my bread, than that the name of the Wizards' Guild be tarnished," said Grizziscus with fervor.

This was an embarrassing situation. Belsheer could not remember every detail, but he knew that he had played a key role in this young fellow's rejection, and not for the soundest of reasons. And here was Grizziscus caring for him, worrying over the guild's good name, accepting all with heroic stoicism.

"You're taking it very well," Belsheer said.

"I am nothing. The guild is all."

Belsheer grunted once again, thinking of the guild and comparing its conduct with the noble example of this youngster. He recalled the angry resignation of Kedrigern, the humiliating Quintrindus affair, the pointless dreary meetings, the appalling mess that was the treasury, the rumors and gossip and backbiting that went on at all times and everywhere, and he felt like a worm.

It could have been different," Grizziscus said in a distant, thoughtful tone. "If I had had a guide, a mentor, a wise elder to lead me in the proper path and check my youthful impetuosity, I would not have strayed."

"Yes. Yes, too bad you didn't," Belsheer said, shaking his head.

"It is not too late," said Grizziscus, enunciating each word clearly, looking hard at Belsheer.

"No, I suppose not. Never too late. A chap can always learn."

"But not without the guidance of a wise wizard. Say, a senior member of the guild," Grizziscus said slowly and distinctly, and a bit louder.

"That certainly wouldn't hurt," Belsheer said.

"It would make all the difference. I would learn to employ my powers properly, instead of misusing them on spatial displacements and dislocations for the convenience of petty tyrants. But alas, untaught and undirected, I did much harm, and now I pay."

Belsheer observed him with awakened interest. "You do spatial displacements, do you?"

"I have a natural talent for such magic."

Details were coming back to Belsheer now. Grizziscus had sent individuals, small settlements, a medium-sized castle, and once — according to rumor — an entire army whizzing off to some remote corner of the world at the bidding of various nasty local rulers up in the wild and lawless

north. His workmanship was superb, but his ethics were deplorable. He was said to have turned on one client in mid-spell, when the original victim had shrieked out an offer to double his fee, with payment on the spot. That sort of behavior gave the profession a bad name. It could not be tolerated, much less rewarded. And so Belsheer had led the opposition to Grizziscus's membership with all the eloquence at his command, and succeeded in having him soundly rejected, and consequently disgraced.

But he was beginning to think that perhaps the stories of Grizziscus's malfeasance had been exaggerations, or even lies. The lad undeniably had character. Seen in person, he was a decent sort. He bore no grudge. Took his punishment like a wizard. Forgave and forgot. Kissed the rod. Perhaps he deserved a second chance. A wise older wizard would set him right and teach him to behave in a manner befitting a guild member. And Grizziscus, in turn, could teach the kindly older wizard the fine points of spatial displacement, a branch of magic Belsheer had never quite mastered.

Belsheer drew himself up and fixed his eye on the younger wizard. He laid a skinny hand on Grizziscus's shoulder and gave him a fatherly pat. In a deep, sententious voice, he said, "Young man, I think I may be able to help you."

GRIZZISCUS WAS an eager and willing pupil and a great help around the workshop. Within two months of coming to study with Belsheer, he found an invaluable chap named Martin to serve as man of all work for the two wizards. Belsheer, who had always had difficulty finding and keeping servants, was pleased and impressed.

As the months passed, the improvement in Grizziscus's character was plain to see. He worked little helpful spells for the local peasants, and refused to accept any payment. He followed the example of his mentor and always referred to guild officials by their full titles, such as "The Attentive and Accurate Secretary" and "The Right Venerable and Puissant Chairman." He taught Belsheer how to do spatial displacements, and guided him in transmitting an army of field mice to the granaries of a nasty, greedy local lord.

And he was not only kindly, respectful, and generous; he was solicitous of Belsheer's well-being. He saw to it that the older wizard got his proper rest, and, with Martin's help, cajoled him into healthful eating habits. He

even insisted that Belsheer take a vacation, albeit a working vacation, in the Valley of the Harkeners to the Unseen Enlightened Ones.

The Harkeners were peaceful folk who devoted their lives to listening for instructive and consolatory voices from another plane. Since no one could be certain where such voices might best be heard, Harkeners listened to everything: old boots, haystacks, boulders, trees, bowls of oatmeal, and anything else at hand. For years, no voices had come through; but now, it was rumored, a Harkener named Versel had reached one. The messages he received were gibberish, but after all the years of silence, the Harkeners were happy for anything that came their way.

"You must visit them, good Master," said Grizziscus when they heard this news. "Perhaps with the aid of your wisdom, the Harkeners will decipher the messages."

"It's possible," said Belsheer with no visible enthusiasm. "That valley must be a dull place, though. Everybody just sits and listens to things."

"Exactly what you need: a quiet, restful retreat after all your labors on my behalf."

Belsheer thought that over, and his expression brightened. "It would be nice to spend a few weeks sitting in the sun, listening to a loaf of bread."

"It's the healthiest thing you could do."

"I might even hear a voice. Surely if there's anything out there trying to make contact, it would appreciate speaking to a wizard."

"Indubitably. My dear Master, you really must go."

Go he did, departing in the early morning two days later. Once he was out of sight, Grizziscus turned to Martin, leering triumphantly and rubbing his hands together. He chuckled. "Perfect. Absolutely perfect," he said. "I will now avail myself of Belsheer's own library to find the proper spell, and swoop to my revenge once he returns."

"Your patience is exemplary, Master."

"Patience is the necessary virtue of avengers, Martin. Along with ingenuity."

"Your ingenuity is awe-inspiring, Master."

"Thank you, Martin. I am also fair. I have decided that when I spell the wicked old meddler, I will leave him a clue to the means of his release."

"Eminently fair, Master. An exquisite conception, if I may say so."

"You may indeed. And now I must set to work. I have narrowed my choices, but my final decision is not yet made. On no account am I to be

disturbed."

Three days later Grizziscus emerged from the workshop haggard and red-eyed, but smiling. He ate heartily and drank deeply, slept soundly for a day and a night, and then settled down to a less grueling schedule, which he followed for nearly four weeks. At the end of that time, a message arrived. Grizziscus took the message, pondered it, spent a full day in rumination, and then informed Martin that they were leaving on the morrow morn to meet Belsheer on his way home.

"A precaution," he said. "Belsheer may be a meddler, but he is not a fool. He is almost certain to have taken measures against being spelled in his own house. Even if he has not, I think it unwise to spell him here, amid his books and in familiar surroundings. No, I will isolate him first, and then strike. This message provides the perfect occasion."

Martin listened impassively. "Have you any special instructions, Master?"

"Lay out my best cloak and boots. And wear your own best outfit. We must dress for the event."

BELSHEER WAS a methodical traveler who stuck to his itinerary. Grizziscus and Martin met him on the road a few hours from Frunsker's Inn, and Grizziscus hailed him joyously.

"What are you doing here? Who's watching the house?" Belsheer demanded.

"I placed a protective spell over the house and grounds, good Master," Grizziscus replied. "I wished to bring you the good news as swiftly as possible."

"Good news?"

"Your friend and colleague, Tristaver, is married!"

Belsheer gaped. "Married?"

"To a beautiful queen whom he freed from a loathsome enchantment. The wedding itself was a private affair, but now the happy couple wish to receive all their dearest friends. The invitation arrived three days ago, and we set out at once to find you," said Grizziscus. He produced the message, which was genuine, and Belsheer read it with astonishment and delight.

"That old rogue! I never thought he'd settle down. He loved to gad about. Always flying off somewhere. Usually as a hawk."

"Is Master Tristaver a shapechanger?"

"I know he can change himself into a bird. I've never seen him as anything else. He claims that once you're a bird, there's nothing else you'd want to be. He's good at love charms, too."

"An unusual combination of specialties," Grizziscus observed.

"The love charms gave him a decent living. Boring magic, but very much in demand. I wonder if that's how he got this queen to marry him."

"The messenger said only that they were very happy."

Belsheer nodded. "Sounds like a love charm to me. Brother Tristaver is a decent fellow and all that, but he's not the sort that a beautiful queen is likely to want to marry." He stroked his beard thoughtfully and, in a little while, added, "On the other hand, there's the example of Brother Kedrigern. He married a queen . . . or a princess. Someone royal. I've heard she's quite lovely, too. Maybe queens are getting sick of marrying kings."

"That may well be the case."

"Yes. Odd coincidence, too. One of the utterances I heard among the Harkeners was, 'The king, the queen, and the butter churn are gaily mud and sunshine.'"

Grizziscus stared at him in bewilderment. "What does that mean, Master?"

"No one's figured it out yet, but they're working on it."

Late in the day, they arrived at Frunsker's Inn, a reasonably clean establishment with a reputation for good food. They dined generously and in high spirits.

Frunsker's ale was said by some to be the best in the region. The wizards sampled it at dinner and found it much to their satisfaction. After dining, they ordered a pitcher apiece. Martin drew the innkeeper aside and engaged him in a long conversation, leaving the two wizards alone. At Grizziscus's urging, Belsheer partook of a second pitcher, and a third. By the time he made his way up the stairs, supported by Grizziscus, he was at the point of sleepy, mellow bonhomie. He regaled his companion with quotations from the Harkeners, not one of which made any sense, and dropped on the lumpy bed with a great sigh.

Martin soon joined them, and answered Grizziscus's look of inquiry with a single nod. At his master's signal, Martin stepped to the door to bar passage. "Hear me, Belsheer," said Grizziscus in a deep, ominous tone.

"Tomorrow," Belsheer mumbled.

"Tonight, meddler! Hear my words and learn the price you are to pay

for disgracing me!"

Belsheer sat up, blinking. He yawned. "What are you talking about? You've had too much ale, my boy."

"I have had too much insult, too much shame, too much humiliation for a wizard to bear . . . and so I say —" and Grizziscus raised his hand, pointing to the astonished older wizard, and intoned:

For deep disgrace you brought on me,

Revenge is mine, as you shall see.

Now you, whose name begins with B.

Hear the spell I place on thee:

B, be bee!"

A light flickered silently through the room. On the bed where Belsheer had been was a bee the size of a ripe, healthy peach.

Martin gasped. Grizziscus laughed aloud and clapped his hands. The bee buzzed faintly, took a few steps, and tumbled on its side.

"Be careful, Master! It may attack!" Martin cried.

"No fear of that. Given the amount of ale Belsheer drank, that bee will sleep until noon. Did you speak to the host?"

"I told him we may leave during the night, and paid him in full. He will not come near the room until tomorrow."

"Good. Get the horses ready. We leave at once." Grizziscus studied the bee and shook his head sadly. "I had hoped to stay and gloat for an hour or two, but the bee is sound asleep."

On the homeward journey, and for a few days afterward, Grizziscus was full of himself. He repeatedly referred to his revenge on Belsheer, and at each repetition, Martin duly praised his patience, dedication, and skill as an avenger. After a week of this, Grizziscus settled into a state of quiet contentment in which he did not refer to his revenge more than twice a day. About a month after the transformation, however, he became thoughtful, and thereafter his mood grew daily more somber. One morning in midsummer, he emerged from his study with purposeful step and summoned Martin.

"We leave tomorrow for the Valley of Aniar. Make the necessary preparations," he said.

"At once, Master. Will our stay be protracted?"

Grizziscus considered for a moment, then said, "It may be. I must find a particular blossom that grows only in that valley. It is the antidote to the spell I placed on Belsheer."

Martin's eyebrow rose fractionally. "Is he to be despelled, Master?"

Grizziscus smiled evilly and shook his head. "Absolutely not."

Grizziscus had undergone a change of heart that had led to a change of plans. His was not the sort of change of heart involving remorse, repentance, or atonement. Quite the opposite. Having avenged himself on Belsheer and finding the experience satisfying, he wished to stay avenged permanently. His only regret was that he had yielded to an infantile impulse to play fair.

At Frunsker's Inn, he had deliberately and repeatedly mentioned to the skivvy that his destination was the Valley of Aniar. This was not true. It was a clue to Belsheer's despelling.

In a certain forest in the Valley of Aniar, and nowhere else on earth, grew the hooting blue thoosh, a parasitic plant whose blossoms contained a nectar that reversed transformations from human to bee, butterfly, or hummingbird. If Belsheer were sufficiently astute to grasp the clue, he would despell himself with help from no one. It was a slim chance, but it was a chance — and now Grizziscus regretted having given the old wizard even that much of a chance to escape his punishment. He was determined to hasten to the valley, destroy every specimen of the hooting blue thoosh, and then proceed with his plans for further revenge.

He had quietly and privately declared war on the Wizards' Guild. Emboldened by the ease with which he had deceived Hithernils and then Belsheer, he now proposed to take action against the other members. They had all voted against him, and thus they all deserved to suffer. He had come to believe that he was a match for them: vain posturing Tristaver, cautious Axpap, crusty Conhoon, even Kedrigern and the formidable Krillicane doyen of the subtle arts, and all the rest. In his own estimation, Grizziscus had already outgrown and outclassed them; now he would demonstrate to the world that he could outwait, outwit, and outspell them.

He kept this grand scheme to himself until he and Martin had arrived in the Valley of Aniar, and Martin had set up the tents and built a fire over which to cook their supper. Then he revealed all, savoring every word.

Martin raised an eyebrow now and then, but said nothing until

Grizziscus had finished, and then his only words were, "An ambitious undertaking, Master."

"For an ordinary wizard, it would be ambitious. But I've already shown that I'm a match for that lot," said Grizziscus.

"True, Master. But still . . . one against the Guild. . . ."

"It's time someone put them in their place. And who more capable than I?"

"Who, indeed, Master?"

Grizziscus snickered. "I can't wait to see their faces when I've. . . ." He paused, stroked his beard, and looked thoughtfully into the fire. "This is going to require some thought. If I turn them into gnats, or worms, I won't be able to see their expressions, and that's half the fun. I missed that with Belsheer," he said peevishly. He remained apart, brooding, until quite late that night.

Next morning, at sunrise, Grizziscus and Martin were at the edge of the forest on the east-facing slope of the valley. Here, and here only, the hooting blue thoosh was to be found. It was a tiny plant, difficult to sight; but at sunrise, its opening blossoms emitted a soft hooting sound, by means of which the plant could be located. The two men dismounted and sat at the base of a great oak overlooking a clearing to await the first rays of the sun and the telltale hoots.

On the instant, without warning, as Grizziscus was rubbing his eyes and Martin was in the midst of a yawn, a hideous creature shrouded in oily black smoke and foul stench appeared in the clearing. Martin took a single look and a single whiff, and crept behind the oak to be quietly and copiously sick. Grizziscus sprang to his feet.

"What is the meaning of this? Where am I? Who are you? Who dares?" roared the monstrous apparition in a thick, gummy voice.

"I am Grizziscus, mightiest of wizards, and this is the Valley of Aniar. What are you?"

"I am the Great Crawling Loathliness of Moodymount, and unbounded is my rage! I will have revenge!"

"I like your attitude," said Grizziscus. "Tell me about it."

A large, round eye appeared in the monster's side and stared coldly at the wizard. "Why?" the creature asked.

"I am a connoisseur of revenge. I may be able to suggest a few refinements."

The creature made a moist, gluey sound. Three more eyes sprouted, one of them on a long stalk. They studied Grizziscus for a time, then were absorbed back into the monster's bulk.

"I was going about my business, attacking a warrior and his companions, when I was treacherously spelled," said the Great Crawling Loathliness.

"Not for the first time, I bet."

"No, not for the first time, though that is no business of yours, and a cheap gibe, besides." The creature's voice was deep and syrupy, but something in its timbre impressed Grizziscus as feminine.

"Are you female?" he asked.

"We are discussing my plight, not my gender."

"As you wish," said Grizziscus with a courtly gesture.

"I was in the midst of a brisk and invigorating skirmish, which I intended to prolong until my appetite was at its peak. My opponents provided a delightfully balanced menu: a dwarf for an appetizer, a burly warrior as main course, a beautiful princess for dessert, and several others to serve as entremets. And just as I was emitting a foul black cloud to confuse and terrify them, I was spatially displaced by a sneak spell."

"A spatial-displacement spell?! Did you see who did it?"

The loathly creature oozed a bit to one side and made a nasty noise. "If it were not so utterly absurd, I would say that it was done by a bee. The last thing I recall —"

Grizziscus staggered back, bumped into the oak, and flung up his arms. He gave a long wail of rage and frustration. "It was Belsheer! That bee was Belsheer!"

"Do not mock me. There is no such thing as a spelling bee."

"There is, you stupid monster, and I made it so! That bee is a wizard, transformed by me into a bee, and he is using my own spells to undo me!"

"You transformed him?"

"I did."

"And he used your spell to send me here?"

"Yes! I taught him everything he knows about spatial-displacement spells."

"Then you shall pay for my inconvenience," the revolting creature rumbled, sprouting two long, sticky appendages that wrapped swiftly around the wizard, covering his mouth and pinning his arms, rendering

him helpless. A maw appeared in the thing's side, and the wizard was popped into it. The opening clapped shut and vanished, and the Great Crawling Loathliness was still.

Martin had witnessed the complete encounter, and wanted to see no more. When the creature's single remaining eye closed, and then vanished, Martin began to work his way backward, staying flat as a puddle on the soft ground. Only when he reached a thick stand of birch did he dare to rise cautiously to a crouch. The monster could no longer be seen or smelled. Martin hurried to the horses and led them quietly to the rim of the valley, then mounted and galloped off, not stopping until sundown.

Martin was a man of some foresight, and Grizziscus had relied on him in practical matters. He always carried the purse when they traveled, and the purse, for this trip, was uncommonly full: Grizziscus had planned to celebrate once the last hooting blue thoosh was destroyed. Martin had gold enough to keep him comfortable for a long time. He also had his master's traveling kit, complete with manuals. It would enable him to work a variety of simple spells.

The more he thought about that, the less it appealed to him. The life of a wizard, even a minor and very unpretentious wizard seeking only to cover expenses, was too unpredictable. It was, in fact, downright hazardous. It was not the life for him, Martin decided. He preferred something settled.

As he lay looking up at the stars, he remembered his long chat with Frunsker. The innkeeper had repeatedly declared his eagerness to sell, and had even mentioned a price. Martin reached into his tunic and squeezed the purse. It was reassuringly plump, and the plumpness was gold.

An innkeeper's life for me, he thought warmly. A small spell every now and then to keep away fleas, rats, and mice: that's all the magic an innkeeper ever needs. He sighed contentedly, turned on his side, and drifted off to sleep with a smile on his face.





FILMS

K A T H I M A I O

ROBIN HOOD

ROBIN HOOD is one of those legends they call "timeless." But I've never particularly liked that term. (And not just because the suffix "less" is intrinsically negative, meaning that something is lacking — as in a childless woman.) Calling a story "timeless" just doesn't do justice to the skills of the individual storyteller. In the entertainment arts, there is no such thing as a sure thing. If you re-tell a legend for the zillionth time, you'd better have something fresh to say about it. And when a storyteller brings new life to an old story, "time" has *everything* to do with their success.

For a story to maintain six centuries of popularity, as this tale of a greenwood outlaw and his merry men has, it must transcend its original time period by speaking to the lives and times of a new audience. Let's state what should be the obvious here: Any version of

Robin Hood produced in the 1990s will tell us more about who we are now than it will about how people lived in the 12th century. Heck, Robin Hood — if he ever existed — probably isn't even from the 12th century! The earliest documents place him in the 14th century (during the reign of Edward II, not Richard Coeur de Lion), and show him in a none too flattering light. It was the spin doctors of 16th century popular culture who really started to spruce up the image of this yeoman hoodlum. Upward mobility was nearly impossible in real life, but Robin steadily improved his station with the help of balladeers and playwrights. By the time they were through, he was the Earl of Huntington. Other embellishments included a cast of side-kicks and enemies. In the romance department, Robin was also a late bloomer. Maid Marian was one of the last characters to join the saga.

Robin is, and ever shall be, an

evolving hero. But for most of this century, those changes have taken place in films. It's a rare (and one might easily argue, fortunate) child who first meets Robin through the drawings and stories of Howard Pyle's *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* today. For most of us, our first glimpse of the prince of thieves is up on a screen.

Elders still recall Douglas Fairbanks in his 11-reel silent epic of 1922. Baby Boomers remember the safe jolliness of Richard Greene's small-screen TV hero "riding through the glen . . . with his band of men." Lots of Baby Boomers' kids remember Robin as a sly fox in Disney's animated feature of 1973. But the one version no one ever forgets is Michael Curtiz's *Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) starring that sexy imp, that undisputed king of buckled swash, Errol Flynn.

If you look at Curtiz's version (and everyone should), you can't help but be caught up in the spectacle, the sheer exuberance of his narrative. The technicolor is eye-popping. (Patric Knowles makes a real fashion statement — and how! as Will Scarlet.) The sets are sumptuous, and so is Mr. Flynn in Lincoln green.

The man couldn't act his way out of a pair of tights, but what does it matter? He was, of course, gorgeous. But his considerable

charisma was about attitude, not looks. His Robin *enjoyed* his life. His machismo was unself-conscious and completely without shame. Life as an outlaw is summer camp to this guy. Fighting was a hoot, gnawing on a leg of mutton was a party, and kissing a spirited Norman lass like Maid Marian (Olivia de Havilland) . . . well, that was fun, too. He did the right thing without trying, and always had a swell time doing it.

And for a moment, at the end of the depression, and before the second World War took hold, you could almost believe that such a man and such a time existed. We can't believe it anymore — although the fantasy is still fun to visit on videotape. Robin Hood, like all our contemporary heroes, has gone through some mighty changes.

In that magnificent failure of a movie, *Robin and Marian* (1976), Sean Connery's Robin is a worn-out warhorse. Addicted to battle, he takes no joy in it. He fears, in fact, that his life has been mean and meaningless. What a far cry from Errol! But at least Sean is reunited with his long-lost love, Marian (Audrey Hepburn), and James Goldman's screenplay imbues his faded glory with a kind of existential romanticism.

By 1981, Robin Hood was reduced to a supercilious public schoolboy. John Cleese is the Sher-

wood outlaw who meets up with *Time Bandits*. His grin is cheery, and his every comment is: "Jolly Good!" But his jolliness is utterly false, and his goodness is far from genuine when you see the way he treats the poor and his motley band of miserable men.

Time Bandits is a fine, fantastical movie, and Cleese is marvelous in his wicked send-up of Robin, but it still seems a shame that such a beloved folk hero should be reduced to this. Old Robbie was at his nadir. It was time to dust off his derring-do again. That's exactly what two very different movies attempted this year.

The one everybody saw was the Morgan Creek Production of Kevin Reynolds's film, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*. That's a pity, really. Because this movie is in all ways inferior to John Irvin's *Robin Hood*, Sarah Radcliffe's Working Title Production for 20th Century Fox. Fox dumped their film onto TV last May rather than go up against Hollywood's flavor of the month, Kevin Costner. And you can't really blame them. Costner is not just an attractive and popular star, he is an award-winning filmmaker for last year's *Dances with Wolves*. It's always fortunate to be able to open a blockbuster summer movie just weeks after your star sweeps the Oscars.

Costner is so hot right now that

much of the viewing public would gladly fork over seven bucks to hear him read the phone book. And the way he reads the lines Pen Densham and John Watson have written for him, you'd almost swear that this screenplay is the phonebook. Costner was understandably exhausted coming into *Robin Hood*. He had just finished post-production on *Wolves* when he started shooting — with no rehearsal. He was tired and unprepared, and it shows. Some devoted Costner fans have argued that this is his calm, folksy latter-day Gary Cooper style, but there is a big difference between laid-back and laid-down-and-died. Mr. Costner's heart just wasn't in this one.

How do you explain the film's success, then? Star power has a lot to do with it. That spiffy high-tech trailer of the shooting arrow didn't hurt, either. And then there's the power of the legend of Sherwood. In the case of *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, the legend was best served by the support players. Alan Rickman turns in a compelling and boldy comic portrayal of the Sheriff of Nottingham. (His performance clashes with the tone of the rest of the movie, but the term comic relief has never been so deeply felt by an audience.) Michael McShane as Friar Tuck and Nick Brimble as Little John also seem to be having a good time helping their audience

do the same.

The rest of the Merry Men *aren't*. These are not happy campers. That you can tell. Words like "lusty," "stout" and "merry" have traditionally been used to describe these tax bandits, but such adjectives just don't suit this group. The most charitable view one can take of the shocking lack of enthusiasm in this picture is that the writers and director were actually aiming for a downer Robin.

Densham's take on Robin makes him a vigilante, out to avenge a murdered, dishonored father. After years in a Middle East prison, his Robin has a lot of bad attitude stored up as well as remorse over his bad relationship with his father. The filial guilt-trip is, of course, quite similar to the thematic underpinnings of one of Costner's earlier triumphs, *Field of Dreams*. That makes Costner the perfect choice for the sad, sensitive side of Densham's new-age Robin. The vigilante aspect is at odds with this, however. You get the idea the filmmakers wished they could split the role between Kev and the other big box-office draw of the moment, Arnold. (I can picture it now.)

That's the problem with grafting the present-day to the olden days. Up-dating may be essential, and in some sense, it is unavoidable, but the seams of the new material to

the old shouldn't show, and they most certainly do in this version in Robin's role. And the piecing shows even more in Robin's angst-ridden relationship with Will Scarlet (Christian Slater), in the pseudo-feminist presentation of Maid Marian (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio), and especially in the addition of a sidekick of color, the "Moor" Azeem (Morgan Freeman), to the cast of characters.

I applaud Densham and Watson's multi-cultural impulses, but they just don't work here. (Hollywood seems much more comfortable with black characters when they can keep them at a distance in time. Morgan Freeman's most successful roles to date have all been historical — *Driving Miss Daisy*, *Glory*, and now *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*. If only the film industry would portray African-Americans as vital, interesting, heroic people today.)

Ethnic diversity of a more believable sort — the tension between Norman and Saxon citizens of medieval Britain — is utilized by Sam Resnick and John McGrath in their version of *Robin Hood*, as it was in the 1938 classic. But Patrick Bergin's Robin is still night-and-day different from Errol. He is edgy and cynical, a self-described "good-for-nothing, drunken ne'er-do-well." It's his pride and temper that cause him to rebel without a cause. It is

only after he sees how the other half (make that nine-tenths) lives that he becomes a socially-conscious outlaw. And even then, he does the right thing for practical reasons, not out of idealism.

Robin's personal transformation makes complete sense, and Mr. Bergin brings exceptional spirit and grace to the role. When his lazy nobleman is forced to get a life, living has much greater value to him. Bergin's Robin has a rollicking good time fighting the good fight. The support cast is excellent, including Jurgen Prochnow as the out-and-out villain, Sir Miles Folcanet, and Jeroen Krabbe as the good-guy-gone-wrong, Sir Roger Daguerre. Owen Teale's Will Scarlet is a best-buddy worth having,

and Uma Thurman is a fabulous, authentically feminist, absolutely medieval-looking Maid Marian.

Here is an up-dated Robin that remains "lusty," "stout" and "merry." It's too late to keep you from seeing the Costner fiasco, and I'm not sure that I would if I could. But if you haven't seen Patrick Bergin as Robin Hood, hie you to the video store immediately. John Irvin's lively, very modern take on the age-old legend reflects very well on the 1990s society for which it was made and on the centuries-old society it seeks to represent. Call that "timeless" if you wish. But only if you call it "timely" too. Irvin's muddy spectacle deserves to be seen on the giant screen, but it retains great power even on a 19-inch tube.



"You're a cat person! I'm a cat person too!"



SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

BEYOND LIGHT

I OFTEN DON'T get answers to my letters. I don't even expect to in many cases. Here are examples of three letters I received lately, which I answered politely, and where I expect no answers.

1) I received a letter asking to reprint a story of mine, saying, "We would like to have you waive the fee." (Naturally, they would. If they were patronizing a butcher, a baker, a grocer, or whatever, they would never think of asking him to let them have something without charge, but why the devil should a poor slob of a writer make any money out of his labors?)

So I replied saying, "I will gladly waive the fee if you, in turn, will waive the use of my story."

There will be no answer, I assure you.

2) I received a request for the reprinting of one of my F & SF essays. Its contents, the letter-writer said, would be very useful to the

group he intended it for.

I wrote back to say I was delighted he would find it useful, but I pointed out that he didn't say anything about money (probably too high-minded to do so), and so I asked, "How much are you proposing to pay me?"

I'll get no answer. After all, why should he pay me? It's well-known that writers write for nothing.

3) The oddest one of all. A person wrote to say that, twenty years before, when he was only sixteen, he wrote to me saying he wanted to be a science writer and did I have any advice for him. I gave him advice which proved to be so good that he is now a science writer and is very grateful.

He apparently wished to send me a token of his gratitude, so he sent me some labels to sign—sixty (!) of them. My fingers, alas, are no longer as supple as they used to be, and signing my name sixty times would be the devil of a chore for

me. So I sent back the labels, unsigned, and said to him that if he really wanted to do me a favor to pay me back for the one I had done him twenty years ago, I wished he would choose something else.

He'll never answer.

But, of course, for me it doesn't matter. However, what if a scientist makes a great and crucial discovery and announces it in the proper manner — and no one answers.

That would be awful, and it happened to a radio engineer named Karl Jansky, back in 1932.

In 1927, AT&T had inaugurated transatlantic radio telephony, but the trouble was that there was static that made it very difficult to understand what was being said.

In 1928, Jansky (then 23 years old) was hired by AT&T to locate the sources of the static, so that perhaps it could be dealt with. Jansky built a set of antennas that were a hundred feet long and that slowly revolved. He thought that in this way he could at least detect the direction from which the static was coming.

Little by little, he eliminated most sources of static, including those that arose from the lightning of thunderstorms. Left over, however, was a hissing sound that seemed to come from the sky. It didn't come from all directions

equally, but seemed to travel across the sky with the Sun. Jansky's first guess, then, was that the Sun was a source of radio waves that created static.

As he pursued the hiss from day to day, however, he found that it did *not* come from the Sun, but from a point in the sky that advanced four minutes (relative to the Sun) every day. The stars, generally, revolve about the Earth (or seem to) in 23 hours and 56 minutes, as compared to the 24 hours for the Sun. It followed, then, that the hiss came from somewhere among the stars, and it came to be called the "cosmic hiss."

What's more, it seemed to come from the general direction of the constellation Sagittarius, where the star clouds of the Milky Way were thickest, and the direction where astronomers felt that the center of the Galaxy was located. It looked, then, as though Jansky had detected radio waves coming from the center of the Galaxy.

Jansky published his work in 1932 in the "Proceedings of the Institute of Radio Engineers." It made the *New York Times* and was mentioned by the *New Yorker*. What it did not get was any sign of interest from astronomers generally. What's more, AT&T did not see that this finding was of any interest to corporate profits, and poor Jansky

was called off.

Why was this? For one thing, astronomers were entirely accustomed to looking at the Universe by way of visible light. To fool around with radio waves — about a million times as long as light-waves — did not seem to make sense.

Secondly, astronomers had no efficient way of trapping and analyzing radio waves generally, so there seemed no use in fooling around with it.

One radio engineer, however, was curious about the matter. His name was Grote Reber. He used \$2,000 of his own money to build a paraboloid that was 31 feet across and that would trap and concentrate radio waves as the lens or mirror of an optical telescope would trap and concentrate light waves.

Reber set up his "dish" in his backyard in Wheaton, Illinois, and spent ten years observing the sky. He not only checked on Jansky's discovery of radio waves from Sagittarius, but detected radio sources from the constellations of Cygnus, Canis Major, and Cassiopeia.

In this way, Reber was the only radio astronomer who existed in the 1930s; he owned the only radio telescope, and he was the first to map the "radio sky." What's more, he detected radio sources from places where there were no bright

stars. His conclusion, then, was that some objects in the sky delivered much more in the way of radio waves than of light waves.

He also found he had no trouble obtaining his radio sources when the weather was overcast or actually raining. The long radio waves penetrated clouds and mist when light-waves could not.

In 1940, Reber published his first paper on his findings in "The Astrophysical Review." The editor was the astronomer, Otto Struve, who found himself looking at material he had never encountered before and did not know if he could understand it. He sent a delegation to Wheaton, Illinois, to investigate the matter firsthand. They had to wait a while before Reber could demonstrate what he was doing, because his mother was using the dish as one end of her clothesline. When she was finished, Reber made the demonstration, and the astronomers were convinced.

The big catch, of course, was that in order to make things out clearly, the instrument that was catching and concentrating the waves would have to be much wider than the individual waves. Since radio waves were a million times as long as light-waves, they were also a million times as fuzzy as light-waves. The 30-foot radio telescope that Reber used was the equivalent

of an optical telescope about 1/1000 of an inch across. You could see virtually nothing with it.

To have a radio telescope that could see as clearly as the 200-inch optical telescope, you would need a single dish that was over 3,000 miles across and had an area greater than that of the United States. Consequently, however interesting Reber's results were, astronomers didn't think they would ever see anything by radio waves that would be even faintly as sharp as what could be seen by light-waves.

Meanwhile, though, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the British were working madly on radar, for it was by radar that they could always tell when and where the numerically superior German airforce was coming to bomb England. It was radar that made it possible for the British to win the Battle of Britain.

But radar made use of radio waves, very much like those that Jansky and Reber had been detecting from the Universe. It followed that without any interest in radio astronomy whatever, the British were devising methods to detect radio waves by means far superior to those of the two pioneer radio astronomers.

What's more, without meaning to, they discovered radio waves from the sky, too.

Thus, on February 12, 1942,

two German warships, the *Scharnhorst* and the *Gneisenau*, passed through the full width of the English channel from Brest, France, to Kiel, Germany, and did so undetected and safely. That got the British all excited, but it was not really their fault. If their radar had been working, they would have spotted the ships and undoubtedly sunk them, but the radars were jammed, and were not working.

That had to be investigated because the British had the horrible feeling that the Germans had discovered a new and efficient way of jamming British radar. They set their radar expert, J. Stanley Hey, to work on the matter, and in no time at all he found that it was not the Germans who were jamming the radar, but the Sun.

The jamming took place in the daytime, when the radar antennae pointed to the Sun. It took place particularly when a large Sunspot group passed across the face of the Sun so that it was facing the Earth. Obviously the Sun, and especially Sunspots, were a strong source of radio noise.

With that, earthly radar and radio astronomy melted into each other.

Once World War II was over, astronomers found themselves with a variety of devices that could be used to detect radio waves and, for

the first time, twenty years after Jansky's discovery, they grew interested in radio astronomy. (Jansky, however, died in 1950, at the age of 45 of a kidney ailment, and never lived to see what was to happen to his discovery.)

The discoveries made by radio astronomy came along very slowly, because radio waves remained fuzzy. Even by 1955, only eight bright sources were definitely detected. Among them was the Crab Nebula, the remnant of a supernova that had exploded nine hundred years before. Another was in Cassiopeia and was thought to be another exploded supernova. Then, there was a giant elliptical galaxy in Virgo and something in Cygnus that was first supposed to be a pair of colliding galaxies.

Radio astronomers had to build larger and larger dishes so as to make out things more and more sharply. The British astronomer Bernard Lovell, who had worked with radar during the war, used his expertise to build a dish that was 250 feet across and that was fully steerable.

The Germans built one that was fully steerable and was 330 feet across. It was so designed that it would not change its shape under the pull of gravity even as it changed its orientation.

The largest dish in the world

was built in Arecibo, Puerto Rico. It was built into a natural valley and was 1000 feet across, but it is not fully steerable. It can only be made to watch a strip of the sky.

Even so, the Arecibo telescope could only see with the precision that an optical telescope could see if it had a lens that was a little over a hundredth of an inch across. A person's unaided eyes could see twice as sharply as the Arecibo telescope could, though of course the eyes saw light and the Arecibo telescope saw radio waves.

It didn't look as though anything larger than the Arecibo telescope could be built, but in the 1950s, the British radio astronomer Martin Ryle got an idea. Instead of building a single large dish, why not build two or three and separate them by considerable distances? Each one could be used to observe a single object in the sky from various angles: The different signals could be combined with each other and, eventually, a picture could be drawn of a radio source that would be the same as though there were a single dish as wide as the separation between the smaller dishes.

By 1955, Ryle was using 36 separate sections, all of them being manually adjusted into the positions required to photograph individual sources, and by means of

this he put together the "Third Cambridge" survey of radio sources, usually abbreviated "3C." It was this listing that eventually made the discovery of quasars possible, eight years later.

Ryle kept improving his techniques and, by 1965, he had managed this "radio interferometry" in such a way that the resolution was 200 times better than anything that could be received by a single instrument. Ryle shared in the Nobel prize in 1974 for this.

By now there are radio interferometers of the Ryle sort that are the equivalent of dishes that would be 20 miles in diameter and that work much faster than the first interferometers.

Even that wasn't the limit. The initial interferometers were connected by transmission lines that had to be laid over rough and uneven countryside. Rather than do that, radio beams were used. For this purpose, the times at which the radio beams were emitted and received had to be measured with extreme accuracy, if the data were to be properly combined. For that purpose, newly devised atomic clocks that lost less than 1 second in a million years were used.

Nowadays, various radio telescopes, scattered over the face of the Earth, and connected by atomic clocks, can see radio waves more

clearly than telescopes can see light-waves. We can study pulsars, quasars, and other radio wave phenomena in enormous detail.

The radio telescopes we use now are equivalent to one that is virtually as broad as the Earth. Does that mean that we have reached the ultimate limit?

Actually, no. Astronomers dream of moving beyond the Earth, of setting radio telescopes in orbit about it. Imagine thirty devices of this sort, revolving about the Earth at a distance of 60,000 miles, or one-quarter of the way to the Moon.

If all these space dishes could be made to combine their data, the result would be equivalent to a single dish, 120,000 miles across or 15 times the width of the Earth.

In some ways, it might be even better to build a radio telescope on the far side of the moon. Everywhere on Earth, and, for that matter, in orbital space about the Earth, there are earthly sources of radio waves that would affect the data collected by the dishes.

On the far side of the Moon, there would be absolute radio silence, at least as far as the Earth is concerned. What's more, radio telescopes could be placed in Lunar craters near the Moon's poles, where Sunlight would never penetrate, and there would be no problems resulting from changes in temperature —

and no problems relating to an atmosphere, either, for the Moon has none.

Another way of studying the Universe by means other than ordinary light-waves is to move into the infra-red. Infra-red waves are shorter than radio waves but longer than those of light.

One advantage of the infra-red is that, like radio waves, they are more able to penetrate dust and mist. Outer space, despite general feelings, is *not* a vacuum. It contains a thin scattering of dust and, in some places, the dust is not so very thin. The result is that light does not make its way through space very easily. For instance, we cannot see the center of the Galaxy. It is hidden by dust clouds. The Orion Nebula is a place where new stars are being born, but we can't watch the details of the process because it is hidden by dust-clouds. Infra-red light can penetrate all that dust, however.

Another advantage of infra-red comes in the study of very distant objects. The farther an object, the more quickly it is receding from us (thanks to the general expansion of the Universe). The more quickly it is receding from us, the more its light is shifted toward the red. The result is that very distant objects shine brightly in the infra-red, and

we would want to pick up that radiation.

Infra-red has the advantage over radio sources in that whereas radio sources are highly discrete so that there are a relatively few sources while most of the sky is radio dead, infra-red, on the other hand, is to be found just about everywhere.

There is a disadvantage to infra-red, also. Visible light and most radio waves find the atmosphere perfectly transparent and reach Earth's surface, where they can be studied without trouble. Infra-red, however, is strongly absorbed by carbon dioxide and water vapor so that we don't get much at the surface. It is necessary to study infra-red from space.

The most successful infra-red detecting device was the "Infra-red Astronomical Satellite," usually abbreviated as IRAS. It weighed a little over a ton and was placed in orbit in 1983. For ten months, it scanned the sky and identified as many as 250,000 infra-red sources.

The most startling discovery it made was that the star Vega had about it a system of dust and gravel, extending out for about 15 million miles. This was considered a "proto-planetary system" since it could be viewed as being in the process of condensing into planets.

In fact, IRAS found more than 40 stars within 75 light-years of our

Solar system that had such proto-planetary systems. This made it seem very likely that stars, generally, had planets; something a number of astronomers (and almost all science fiction writers) had long thought must be true. It's nice to get evidence that seems to support the idea.

IRAS also picked up infra-red from various comets, asteroids, and strings of dust. Some galaxies proved to be much brighter in infra-red than in visible light. Why this should be is not known.

At the other end of the spectrum are the X-rays, which are much more energetic than radio waves, infra-red, or visible light, and therefore should be formed only in certain highly energetic processes. In general, the feeling seems natural that X-rays are formed in much smaller quantities than the longer, less-energetic waves and, therefore, must be of much less interest to astronomers.

For instance, the only heavenly object known, prior to 1962, to give off X-rays, was our own Sun, which gave them off from its extraordinarily hot corona. And, at that, our Sun gave off only one-millionth as much X-rays, as it does visible light. If the Sun weren't as close to us as it was, there would be no chance at all of detecting its X-rays, and the general

feeling was that since the Sun was an ordinary star, we should detect no X-rays from the Universe as a whole.

But then, in 1962, rockets were sent into space with devices that would pick up X-ray radiation, and it was discovered, to the surprise of astronomers, that there were a number of "X-ray sources" here and there and that the energy so emitted was in some cases up to thousands or even millions of times the entire Solar spectrum of stars like our Sun. Some objects, like quasars, Seyfert galaxies and the Crab Nebula, were found to be brighter in X-rays than in radio waves.

The first important X-ray satellite was "Uhuru," launched on December 12, 1970 from Kenya. The name is the Swahili word for "freedom."

For two years it scanned the sky and came up with no fewer than 200 X-ray sources. A number of them seemed to be pulsars, that is, rotating neutron stars. However, the most exciting discovery it made was that of Cygnus X-1, which is, of all objects, the one most likely to be a black hole.

What else can we study? In the electromagnetic spectrum, there is ultraviolet radiation which consists of waves shorter and more energetic than those of visible light, but longer and less energetic than those

of X-rays.

In the 1960s and 1970s, satellites called "Orbiting Solar Observatories" were launched for the particular purpose of studying the Sun's spectrum in the ultra-violet region. There are also Orbiting Astronomical Observatories, which examine the Universe generally in the ultra-violet.

The most energetic of all the portions of the electromagnetic spectrum are the gamma rays, which I recently discussed in "Royal Gamma" (June 1991).

What does that leave us?

Subtract electromagnetic radiation and we have three forms of non-electromagnetic radiation that remain to be studied.

The first of these, and the longest known, are the cosmic rays, which I discussed in two articles, "Out of the Everywhere" (November 1988) and "Into the Here" (December 1988).

They are altogether different from any of the other radiations that bathe us in that they are electrically charged, and that some of them, at least, are the most energetic bits of radiation that we encounter. They are important as a field of study because of their enormous energies, which may reveal something about the Universe. Unfortunately, the fact that they are electrically charged means that

they follow curved paths along the magnetic fields that surround the stars, and the galaxies as a whole. It is therefore completely impossible to tell the point of origin of particular cosmic rays. This hampers us a good deal in studying them.

The remaining two forms of radiation are massless and without electric charge, as is true of electromagnetic radiation, but there are important differences. Electromagnetic radiation interacts readily with matter and can, therefore, be easily detected and studied. The two non-electromagnetic forms of radiation, neutrinos and gravitons, do not interact with matter very much and are therefore very difficult to detect and study.

Individual neutrinos can travel through many light-years of lead without being stopped, but if you have trillions upon trillions of them, some will — by chance — be stopped within a matter of centimeters. As it happens, the Universe is a constant source of trillions upon trillions of them, so that they can be (with difficulty) detected.

For instance, the Sun is supposed to produce a vast number of neutrinos every second. A number of them pass through the Earth and a few of these can be stopped. Astronomers have calculated how many ought to be stopped, and for twenty years they have been work-

ing with "neutrino telescopes" designed to stop them.

Unfortunately, no more than a third the number of neutrinos have been detected, and the latest neutrino telescope detected virtually none at all. This is "the mystery of the missing neutrinos" and is inducing much head-scratching among astronomers.

The only neutrino source, other than the Sun, which we have been able to study, are neutrinos from supernovas. The supernova that exploded in the Large Magellanic Cloud in 1987 was the only one to do so when we had neutrino telescopes in place, and the only one close enough to give us a fair shot at it. Neutrinos *were* detected, and now, as better and better neutrino telescopes are built, we need only wait for more supernovas to give us further neutrinos.

That leaves the gravitons, which are so subtle in their properties that no one has been able to detect them yet. However, Einstein predicted their existence, and his general theory of relativity has yet

to be disproved in any of its aspects. Astronomers are therefore certain the gravitons are there.

Gravitons are produced in unusual floods whenever a huge mass is accelerated suddenly. If two stars collide, for instance, or if a star is swallowed by a black hole, gravitons appear in huge numbers. If we could detect gravitons, therefore, we are likely to be able to study very rare phenomena that are also very extreme — and how wonderful that would be.

In fifty years, then, we have enormously supplemented what we thought, till then, had been the only clue we had to the Universe — visible light. Instead we added: radio waves, infra-red waves, X-rays, ultra-violet rays, gamma rays, cosmic rays, neutrinos, and, eventually, gravitons.

It all shows us what was invisible before, and tells us how much more exciting the Universe is than could possibly have been imagined a short time ago.



The inspiration for our beautiful cover, "The Man Who Loved Kites," is a change of pace for F&SF regular Dean Whitlock. Dean says this was one of the easiest and most enjoyable projects he has written. He writes, "I became a kite aficionado over the summer, and was inspired to write this tale. The main events are taken from Chinese oral tradition and written history, and I have jumbled together some actual names from those histories to provide monikers for my characters." He also promises a bit of fun for anyone who is familiar with kite lore.

THE MAN WHO LOVED KITES

By Dean Whitlock



HIS IS THE STORY OF
Huan Po, the poet who in-
vented kites, and of Li

Zheng, the sorceress who died because they were beautiful. It also concerns General Liu Hsin, who learned that war and beauty can never share the same house.

Now, Huan Po did not try to invent kites. He was trying to pray. But the gods never answered his prayers, so he went looking for a way to catch their attention.

Huan was a good man. He was small and quick and strong for his size, because he had been raised a farmer. But one day a monk dressed in plain yellow robes came to the city of Pi Lao, where Huan lived, and spoke in the streets, and started a school. And before the year was out, Huan was a monk himself. He learned to read and to write. And he learned to preach.

He went out to speak in the streets, as his teacher had done, but Huan discovered, much to his shame, that he was shy. He could preach quite forcefully, and for hours, standing alone and unnoticed on a quiet corner of the square outside the grand mansion of the mayor, but whenever a crowd stopped to listen, even a crowd as small as one child, his mouth went dry, and his tongue turned stiff and useless as a dead crow.

So Huan became a silent monk. He spent his days begging for alms for the school and silently praying prayers. His teacher praised his devotion, but in his own heart, Huan felt less than useful. True, his friendly smile made him a good beggar, but his prayers went unanswered. The teacher, at least, could point to his pupils. The preacher could point to his converts. Huan could point to . . . nothing.

"This is the nature of gods," said his teacher. But still, in his heart, Huan was shamed.

One day, late in the time of harvest, when the wind blows from the mouth of the western dragon, Huan went out through the heavy green gate of Pi Lao into the fields below the high wall that encircled the city. He went to find some solace in the work he had known as a boy. Farmers look down much of the time, but their fingers are deep in the rich brown soil. A farmer can see what he does, and prays with words only when he has to. Huan got a sickle from his father's house and went to reap grain.

Ah, but the sun and the wind turned his head toward the sky, where the gods lived in the highest clouds of Heaven. He lifted his face to them — the sun, the wind, and the clouds — and shouted a prayer in his mind.

The gods did not respond.

But the gusting wind blew his straw hat from his head and sent it whirling up into the air to the height of the tallest tree. And that gave Huan an idea.

He went back to his father's house and found a brush and a bit of red paint and carefully wrote his prayer all around the top of his hat. The woven straw was not the best surface for writing, and the round shape was not the best for the straight lines of his prayer, but Huan was so excited by his idea that he was sure the gods would ignore such minor flaws. He ran back out to the field, blowing on the paint to hurry it dry. Then he stood and waited for the strongest gust of wind. And when it came, bending the tops of the trees and whipping leaves into the air in spiral fountains, he threw his hat as hard and as far as he could into the sky.

It soared. It twirled and danced on the wind. And it fell to the ground quite a distance away. Huan waited a second, hoping for a quick answer from the gods. When nothing came, he chased after his hat. And chased for quite a while, in an unwanted game with the playful wind.

"It wasn't high enough," he decided, when he finally caught the hat not two steps from the banks of the River Theng. He looked around for a high place from which to throw his hat, but the houses and trees seemed far too low in light of the height of the gusting clouds, and the mountains were much too far. But then his eyes rested on the high stone wall that encircled the city of Pi Lao.

The walls were the pride of the city, built high and thick in a time when barbarians were known to live in the west, and greedy princes lived to the east, and gangs of bandits roamed to the north and the south. For two hundred years, they had guarded the merchants and mayors, the farmers and fishers, the priests and poets of Pi Lao.

Actually, no one had ever tried to breach them. No one had ever marched over the horizon — north, south, east, or west — with banners flying and swords raised to pillage and kill. The gates had not been closed since they were built. The scullions raised pigeons in the towers and hung the mayor's quilts to dry on the battlements. Children played on the outer walk. The guards lounged sleepily against the stones, never knowing that soon they would find themselves grateful for the masonry skills of their ancestors.

It was there that Huan went to send his prayer, and his hat, up to the gods. He braced himself on the highest point of the outer walk and threw his hat with all the strength of his faith up and out into the wind.

From this, Huan learned two things: the gods were remarkably inattentive, and he would need a way to retrieve his hat.

Or whatever he used, since his hat flew far out and down into the shadows of the setting sun, and whether it flew into the River Theng, which flowed deeply around two sides of the city, or whether it was claimed by a farmer cutting grain in the fields below, search as he might, Huan could not find it.

He went back to his small room at the school, disappointed, but certain he had found the way to pitch his voice to the heavens. He spent the night building a better hat. It was not a real hat, of course. It was square, for one thing, and covered with silk, which was the lightest cloth he

could find, silk quietly pulled from the lining of a fine but tattered cloak that had been donated by a clerk in the mayor's retinue. It was a favorite garment of the teacher, who was from the south and relished the extra warmth in this brisk and windy time of year. Huan hoped he wouldn't notice a draft.

Huan made a frame of light sticks of bamboo and twine, and stretched the silk tightly. Then he got his brushes and bottles and began to write his prayer. The ink ran on the cloth, so he turned the runs into curlicues. The curlicues became branches, and the branches bore fruit, and the fruit drew butterflies and birds. In his shyness, Huan could never admit that he had a fine hand with a brush, but when the "hat" was done, even he was filled with pride at its beauty.

He was not so certain about the prayer. It seemed a bit flat and presumptuous, which was how he had always felt when someone stopped to hear him in the square. But there it was, drying on the silk. He went to bed with high hopes for the morning.

That dawned a beautifully windy day, and Huan was up on the wall almost before the sun broke through the eastern veil. The farmers, men and women, began a harvest chant in the fields below. The noodle vendor sang his wares in the streets of the city. A small boy ran along the top of the wall, swinging a wind flute at the end of a line. And Huan threw his prayer into the sky.

The wind grabbed the "hat" like a leaf and whipped it around. It hung a moment, fluttering, then began to fall into the shadows below the wall, and Huan's hopes fell with it. But this time he had tied a string to it. The string went taut, and the kite — for that's what it now was — the kite leaned into the wind. The supple frame bent a little. And up it went, soaring, looping, spinning at the end of the string like a madman dancing on a fire. Huan shouted with joy.

Then the wind let up. The kite flattened and began to swoop to the right. Huan felt his heart climb in his chest, willing the kite to climb, too. The wind picked up, and the kite bent again and flew off in a wild curve. The string slid through Huan's fingers. He clenched it, and felt it burn his skin. The kite spun and dipped like a wild thing. It dropped as much as it climbed, beyond Huan's control. Finally it flew down into the lee of the wall. The string went slack, and the kite fell, swinging in at the end of the string to strike against the stones.

Huan pulled it up. His hands were shaking with excitement. His heart was pounding. He stared at the kite in amazement, holding it out to catch the sun, and almost lost it again to the wind. He turned and saw the boy with the wind flute and two or three other children staring at him with wide eyes. He grinned, and they grinned back, nodding.

"I must tame it a bit," he told them, and he sat down on the battlements to think, cradling the kite in his lap. And he had a thought. He unwrapped the sash that belted his robe. With nimble fingers, he undid the stitching and tore off a long, thin ribbon of cloth. He tied the ribbon to the bottom of the kite. "This will keep you pointing up," he told it.

He held the kite out and let the wind take it. And this time, he let it go gently, paying out string as the wind demanded, pulling back a little whenever the wind slowed. The ribbon of sash flapped and dangled. The kite kept its head to the sky and rose higher and higher toward the clouds. The children cheered.

Huan's eyes followed the kite. His heart soared with it. He completely forgot why it was there. He was only glad that it was.

Then, suddenly, the string ran out. One moment, it was slipping through his fingers. The next, it was gone, trailing off after the kite with a will of its own.

Immediately the kite began to spin and dip. The children — and Huan, too — gasped. But the weight of the string was enough to keep some tension on the kite. It rose no higher toward the gods, and neither did it fall to Earth. Huan stared in disbelief, and then dismay, and then despair, as his beautiful kite flew away and out of sight over the River Theng.

That very day, however, the teacher lost another bit of warmth to the cause of worship. It was a bigger bit, too, for Huan had grown bolder with success. The inks he chose were brighter, the birds and branches more graceful, and the prayer. . . . Well, the prayer was actually smaller, and, reading it carefully back to himself while the inks dried, Huan felt it was even flatter than before. "So?" he reasoned. "The real point is to get their attention. I will say more next time."

He tied on, not one, but two tails, torn from the remains of his sash, one at each of the lower corners. And he searched the school for string, until he had a great ball of it tied firmly to a heavy stick.

The kite flew beautifully.

Over the next few weeks, Huan gained a large following of children,

and he learned a great deal about flying kites. He learned that the length of the tail was far more important than the weight. He learned that he could bow the bamboo backward a bit and do without a tail at all — though he loved the way they flapped, and so he kept them on. He learned that a wind flute tied to the kite made a very wonderful, haunting sound.

He also learned that the walls of the city were not actually a good place from which to fly. The wind eddied and churned as it rushed over them, and tried to drag his kite down to crash against the stones.

And he learned that very few people appreciated his efforts at devotion. The guards thought he was a nuisance, running around on the wall looking for the best wind. His teacher thought he was losing some of the seriousness required for proper prayer. And many people were afraid of his kite, taking it for a demon, and him for a sorcerer. No matter how beautifully he painted it, no matter how lovely it soared, there were always those who made the sign against evil and hurried indoors when they saw it. The children stopped coming, kept away by fearful parents.

Because of all this, he took to flying his kites outside the city, far from obstructing walls and narrow minds. Because of all this, he was completely alone and completely out of sight of the great green gates when they were frantically swung shut for the first time in two hundred years.

NOW, GENERAL Liu Hsin considered himself a pragmatist. "What more practical time to march to war," he reasoned, "than the harvest?" There was food aplenty all along the march. Each town and city that fell to his army provided quite enough to feed them on their march to the next town or city. And so he made his way eastward and southward, cutting down the few who barred his way, removing heads from the previous heads of state, and trying to decide which title he preferred: General, Conqueror, or Emperor.

"Why not all three?" he reasoned pragmatically. "To my army, I am General; to my enemies, I am Conqueror; and when I have conquered every city from here to the sea, my people can call me Emperor."

These were his reflections as his army rose over the western horizon and marched toward Pi Lao. Liu Hsin leaned forward in the saddle, ready for a few days of pillage and summary justice before marching on to the next city. But the great green gates swung shut in his face, and he found

himself suddenly facing a most impractical situation — laying siege in the first days of winter.

He sent his troops scurrying through the fields around the city and along the River Theng, to capture whoever remained outside the wall. Then he put them all to work to harvest the remaining grain and slaughter any pig and goat unfortunate enough to have been left behind in the mad rush toward the gates that had followed the appearance of his army. He made his camp before the main gate — out of sling and bow range, of course — and posted guards on all the roads in and out of Pi Lao.

Then he sent a herald to the gates, bearing the head of some poor farmer as a symbol of his seriousness. The gates remained closed. So Liu Hsin sent a large force against them, armed with shields and a giant ram. A rain of stones and hot oil drove them back. He sent a troop of archers close in to fire flaming arrows onto the roofs of the city. The arrows bounced off the high wall, and the defenders sent their own arrows winging out to drive off the archers. Liu Hsin sat on his horse and reflected on walls.

Meanwhile, Huan Po had had a wonderful day flying his kite. For hours he had played with the wind, sending the kite into loops, swirls, and dives by letting up and pulling in on the string. The gods, he reasoned, would be much more apt to spot a moving object than a still one. He had also added bone rattles and a pair of wind flutes, a suggestion from a certain child, in the hopes the noise would draw their eyes. The kite hooted like a lovesick bull and clacked like a she-bear gnashing its teeth.

And he had had great fun with the painting on this new kite (for which his teacher had grudgingly donated what remained of the lining in his robe). In deference to his critics, he had drawn the face of a fearsome demon, with long yellow fangs and bloodshot eyes and writhing hair that twined with the symbols of his prayer. And the prayer. . . . Well, the prayer was pretty much the same.

Huan had gone several miles from the city, and had put a large copse of trees between himself and the high walls, so no one could actually see his flying demon. He was well aware of how his attempt at humor would be taken. And he was having so much fun trying to get the gods' attention that he was totally unaware of the tramping army and the blaring horns and the screams of battle. He was totally unaware of the small troop of soldiers that crept fearfully up behind him and watched as he made

a demon dance in the sky on a leash.

He was totally unaware of the one trembling private who tiptoed forward with a black sack clenched in his white fingers. Huan was aware of nothing but the wonderful kite — until the bag came down over his head, and the string fell from his fingers, and the soldiers cried out as the kite twirled and swooped down, hooting and clacking like the being it seemed it was. The private clung to the sack for dear life, praying shrilly to his own gods that the sergeant was right that a sorcerer couldn't curse what he couldn't see.

Then a gust of wind bore the demon kite up and away across the River Theng. Then and only then did the soldiers have the courage to strike Huan on the head and bind his senseless body. They carried him immediately to General Liu Hsin.

The general was still staring at the wall, trying to think of a practical way to breach it that didn't include losing most of his army in the process. When he heard that his men had captured a sorcerer, he thanked the gods for salvation and hurried back to the camp, already plotting ways that magic could be used to burst open green gates. But when he saw the small, limp body of Huan Po, and heard the tale of the demon, he was enraged.

"You let the demon escape!" he bellowed, and he sent the sergeant off to be flayed.

Huan heard all this vaguely through the black sack and the ringing in his ears. He was dizzy, and his head hurt quite a lot, and he was afraid. He was also a little angry over the loss of his kite — it had been the best flyer so far.

Suddenly hands grabbed him and pulled him up. The sack was roughly drawn from his head, and he stood squinting in the glare of the setting sun. He looked around, blinking, a friendly-faced young man with as much an air of sorcery as a pigeon.

Seeing him, Liu Hsin was inclined to reject the whole story out of hand, but the ashen faces of the soldiers holding Huan's arms made him reconsider. They had obviously seen something, and sorcerers were known to be shape-changers. Who knew how old and ugly this man really was?

"Well, sorcerer," he said, "my men tell me you had a demon at the end of a tether and made it prance in the sky. Is this true?"

Huan, who had been marveling at the uncanny resemblance between

the general and the demon face on his lost kite, never even considered lying. After all, he was proud of his invention. "Your men were mistaken," he replied. "I was flying a hat."

The general glared accusingly at the soldiers, who began a fearful babble of protest. "Quiet!" he ordered them, and they did, trembling. "A flying hat?" he said to Huan. "Do you expect me to believe that?"

"Well, I guess it does need a better name," Huan replied. "You see, it started from a hat. I was trying to pray, and the wind blew my hat up into the air. But it went only so high, so I made a better one that could fly up to where the gods would see it, and. . . ." Huan trailed off, mouth dry and tongue as stiff as ever before the crowd of soldiers and the bloodshot eyes of the general.

"The man is quite mad," an aide whispered.

General Liu Hsin secretly agreed, but he was thinking about flying hats and high walls. "Tell me, sorcerer, or whatever you are," he demanded, "how high can this 'hat' of yours fly?"

"Oh, very high," Huan replied, warming to the interest.

"As high as that wall?" the general asked, pointing over his shoulder at the implacable face of Pi Lao.

"Even higher," Huan said proudly. "As high as you have string."

"Can it lift a weight?" the general inquired.

Huan paused, considering. "It could lift a little weight, I suppose. I'm sure it could carry more, if the hat were big enough and the wind strong enough."

Liu Hsin smiled. "What would you need to make one that could lift a small pot filled with coals?" he asked.

"Some splines of bamboo and a swatch of silk. A little twine and glue. Paints and brushes."

"Paints and brushes?"

"For the prayer."

"Of course," Liu Hsin said gently, as to a child. "For the prayer."

Huan was given his own tent to sleep in, and the next day the general sent over bales of silk taken from his previous conquests, and sheaves of split bamboo. His men brought rolls of string and twine of all sizes and made up pots of glue.

"And the paints," Huan reminded them. The general scowled, and they hurried to obey.

Now, Huan was neither as crazy nor as simple as he appeared. He could see the heads on the pikes that decorated the general's tent. He could hear the moans of the poor sergeant bleeding to death at the edge of the camp. He knew what Liu Hsin intended with his pot of coals — or pots, more likely — and he knew what the citizens of Pi Lao could expect for mercy when their houses caught fire and they were forced to open the gates to the army. He considered going to the general and outright refusing to build a single kite. He was not afraid to die.

Neither was he willing to die until he had to. The thought of speaking directly to the gods was intriguing, if only so he could complain about their eyesight. But he was a man with a challenge, to catch the gods' interest while still on this plane of being. Besides, he wanted to fly at least one more kite before he died.

So he built a kite for General Liu Hsin. It was his largest yet, so it could bear the weight of the pot. Huan also realized that the pot would have to hang, not from the kite, but from a tether on the flying line, so it would not interfere with the wind or inadvertently catch the kite itself on fire. He thought for a while about a way to release the pot, but then realized he'd need only steer the kite into a dive that would crash it onto the roofs of the city. In all, he became quite intrigued with the problem.

But he also planned his escape. On the broad silk sail, he painted a scene of the city of Pi Lao, viewed from above, as the kite — or a god — would see it. In his painting, mist rose from the loop of the River Theng, softening the lines of the walls and blending into the fields and trees. In the trees he painted brilliant fruits and birds on leaves tinged with the colors of fall. And twined cleverly in the leaves, where only the most astute might see it, was his prayer, a simple plea for help to rescue the people of Pi Lao and, if the gods were so inclined, a simple monk named Huan Po.

For a moment he wondered if the gods hadn't actually answered him already, by giving him the means to make the most beautiful and clever kite he had ever constructed. But he remembered the severed heads and the skinned sergeant, and he realized that not even the gods would be this imaginative in their answer.

So he took three big balls of twine and tied their ends together. He carefully unwound the middle ball halfway, chafed the line till it would break at the slightest tug, and rewound it. And then he announced

to the general that he was ready to test the kite.

A sizable troop, with General Liu Hsin at the head, escorted Huan back to the field beyond the copse of trees. The soldiers who had captured him did not volunteer for this duty. When they reached the edge of the field, Huan fell to his knees before the kite, wailing out a mad blather of words that sounded half prayer and half invocation. His escort all backed up a step.

Huan rose and bowed to the kite, thanking it profusely.

"What's all this?" the general demanded.

"I am praying that the kite will have a strong spirit to carry such a heavy load," Huan said, "and that I will have the strength to control it. These things are very tricky, you know."

The escort took another step back.

So, when Huan walked out to the middle of the field to prepare the kite for launching, the entire troop stayed at the edge of the trees. Even the general kept his distance.

Huan hummed happily as he tied a string to the pot with its little pile of hot coals. It weighed less than a pound, and the wind was brisk. He had no doubt that the kite could carry it. He turned and waved his arms at his escort. They shifted, and not a few drifted back under the trees.

Then Huan lifted the kite and let the wind take it. It tugged impatiently at the line, but he let it out slowly, letting it play and dance as much as it liked. He made a show of arguing with it, thinking up insults.

"Climb, you western heathen!" he ordered it. "Climb, devil!" He slacked the line, and the kite shook furiously.

When it was up about fifteen feet, he fastened the pot string to the flying line, and then the kite had its revenge. The weight changed the angle of the line so much that the kite dipped its head and swooped right at him. Huan ran madly across the field, pulling in the line as fast as he could and juggling the hot pot at the same time. His audience drew in a unison gasp that brought tears of laughter to his eyes. He wished he had taken the time to add a wind flute and some rattles.

He turned and confronted his demon, calling it devil spawn and serpent bait. He grabbed the kite and berated it soundly, surreptitiously adjusting the point of the bridle. Then he commanded the kite back into the air. It gave him a fight until he had the pot on the line, but this time the weight hung correctly, and the kite leaped up. Huan played with

the string, making the kite swoop and dance furiously.

General Liu Hsin came up slowly beside him, keeping one eye always on the kite. He was now quite certain that Huan was both mad and a sorcerer. But the kite was up high and appeared to behave itself. More important, the pot of coals was up there, too.

"How high will it go?" he asked Huan.

"Not nearly as high as it would like," Huan said, pulling on the string slightly so the kite surged upward. "Ho, kindling!" he shouted. "Stay calm, or I'll put you *in* a pot of coals!" He slacked the string slightly, and the kite obeyed. "Once they taste the high air," he told Liu Hsin, "they don't want to come down."

"It looks high enough for our purposes," the general stated with the air of a satisfied man.

"I'll give it a bit more rein," Huan said, "just to be sure." He let out more line, and the kite rose quickly to a small patch on the bright blue of the sky. "See how it charges up," Huan murmured, somewhat wistfully. He let out still more line, and felt the chafed part slide through his fingers and up into the sky.

"Shouldn't you bring it down?" the general asked.

"I have plenty of string," Huan said, pointing his toe at the third ball of twine lying on the ground at his feet.

"That's high enough for me," the general told him. "Bring it down."

"As you wish, my lord," Huan replied humbly. He pulled on the line. The kite fought him, climbing higher. He pulled again, a short, hard jerk. The kite veered right and left, still firmly attached. Huan began to worry.

He started hauling the kite in, letting the string bounce against his hands. He started to mutter real curses at the damned thing. Liu Hsin took a step back. The troops looked from Huan to the shaking, straining kite and shifted nervously. Huan felt the chafed line pass through his hands, and his heart sank. But just then, at a point higher than the tallest tree, the line parted with a snap that left Huan staggering backward. The kite lurched. The pot swung crazily below it. And then they both wafted off on a gust of wind and disappeared over the River Theng.

Huan shouted aloud with relief, then remembered his audience and quickly changed the shout to a curse.

The general turned on him in anger. "You let it get too high!" he snapped. "It's escaped us!"

Huan bowed low. "My apologies, Lord General," he said. "I should have been firmer with it from the start."

The general relaxed, mollified by Huan's demeanor and the sudden memory that he was dealing with a sorcerer, and a mad sorcerer at that. "Come," he ordered, walking toward his men. "You proved it could be done; that's what counted. Now make me thirty more. No, fifty, and teach my men to fly them."

"I will be happy to make as many as you like," Huan replied as they approached the woods and the escort. "And I will be happy to teach any man who will volunteer." Every soldier was suddenly occupied with something very important near his shoe.

"Don't worry about volunteers," the general said. "I will order them to learn." The soldiers held their breath and tried to look incompetent.

"Oh, I could never be responsible for what would happen, my lord," Huan said. "A man must give himself willingly to this art, or. . ."

"Or?" the general asked.

"I can't begin to describe it. You saw how willful these things can be. But," Huan told him, "I can set them all flying myself, one after the other, and then make them all dive together. Or near enough together that it won't matter."

"All right," Liu Hsin conceded, and the troop exhaled like a spring breeze. "How soon?"

Huan considered. "A week," he said finally, "maybe two."

"That's too long," the general told him.

Huan shrugged. "With that many," he said, "I will need a great deal of spiritual preparation. I wouldn't want them to get out of hand."

"One week," the general stated flatly, and he mounted his horse to lead them back to the camp.

Huan took a look back at the sky, at the spot where the kite had disappeared. *Surely, he thought, surely the gods must have seen this one.*

They didn't. Or they gave no sign.

The kite, meanwhile, flew eastward on the wind, following the track of the first two kites before it, until the land began to rise. Then its line caught in the top of a tall pine, and the kite swung down. The pot struck a rock and shattered, but the coals had died, so there was no harm done. Instead, with the weight gone, the kite bounced back up into the air,

So it was a giant owl that spotted Huan's kite flapping above the pine tree.

where it looped and flapped in the gusting breeze while night fell and, later, a half-moon rose among the stars.

That was where Li Zheng found it just before dawn.

At the time, she was flying in the form of a giant owl, enjoying the moonlight and the play of the wind. Li Zheng was a true sorceress, you see, a shape-changer. She was light and supple as young bamboo, which was why she was named Zheng, and she preferred birds to all of the other animal shapes in her palette. Often she would take on the form of a crane and fly along the rivers, scouting fish from on high. Other times she would be a falcon and soar in the high pillars of air that held up the thunder-heads. At night she would become an owl and swoop about among the trees.

She only wished that she could truly play with the birds as they gathered in flocks at the start and end of the summer. But although most people do not realize this, a shape-changer is not a weight-changer. Li Zheng, as small and light as she was, was still a giant to a bird. When she became a crane or a hawk, she was a giant crane or hawk, with a size sufficient to carry her full weight through the skies. As a youngster, she had once tried to join a flock of geese. They had fled, honking in terror.

So it was a giant owl that spotted Huan's kite flapping above the pine tree. It caught her attention immediately, because she had found the first two already and had them hanging from the rafters in her tiny hut. The first had gone farthest east, and so she had found it quite near her home. She had found the second a few weeks later, drawn by the mournful hooting of the wind flutes on its bamboo spars. The face was quite horrible, but also quite beautiful, and it added to her curiosity.

So she had flown westward this night, following the line drawn by the resting places of the first two kites, and found the third kite flying from the pine tree,

It was magnificent. And it gave her the name of its maker, in the prayer twined cunningly in the branches of the trees. She took it home and hung it with the others. She lived alone, because she was known as a sorceress, and no one wanted to share lives with a sorceress. No one believed

that a shape-changer couldn't also cast a spell.

The kites brightened her home and her heart. Even the demon made her feel less alone. She realized she would have to meet this man, Huan Po, and try to save him. She studied the painting, enjoying its beauty and memorizing the scene. The next night she flew again westward.

Huan Po was busy building kites the next day, when a guard timidly entered the tent.

"You pardon, Great Sorcerer," the man said, "but your grandmother is here."

"My grandmother?" Huan repeated in surprise. Both of his grandmothers had long since died.

"Yes, Sorcerer," the guard replied. "She said you had sent a messenger to bring her here to help you."

Huan's heart began to beat quickly. *At last!* he thought. *The gods have answered my prayers!*

"Of course I sent for her," he told the guard. "How else will I tame all of these hat demons for your general. Send her in immediately."

The guard rushed out and came back quickly with a slight, withered lady wrapped in a dark shawl.

"Hello, Grandson," said the old woman.

Huan's heart sank. This was his answer from the gods? This fragile old woman?

"I saw your message flying in the sky," she said, stepping closer. "Am I welcome?"

"Of course, Grandmother," Huan stammered. "I just didn't expect you quite so soon."

"I flew on the wings of an owl," she said. Then she turned to the guard, whose eyes had grown wide as wine cups. "Thank you, my boy," she said.

He mumbled and nodded and quickly backed out of the tent.

Huan dropped to his knees. "Goddess," he said, "thank you for answering my prayer."

"Goddess!" she said with a laugh. "Do I look like a goddess?"

"How could I know the myriad forms a god might take?" Huan said.

"Oh, get up," Li Zheng told him. "I am no more a goddess than you are a god, and much less of an artist. Show me. Show me these beautiful flying pictures you are making. And remember to call me 'grandmother.'" She

walked past him to look at the three kites he had already finished and the fourth being painted on the rug.

Huan rose and dusted off his knees, but before he could say a word, General Liu Hsin strode into the tent.

"Who is this woman?" he demanded.

"This is my grandmother," Huan said. "Grandmother, this is the great General Liu Hsin, who had the wonderful idea of dropping hot coals on the city from my hat demons."

The general stared suspiciously at the old woman, but he had to admit that there was a definite family resemblance.

"Is this another sorcerer?" he demanded.

"She is as great a sorcerer as I am," Huan replied. "She has come to help me, since your own men are unable to control my hat demons."

The general took a longer look at Li Zheng. They were two snakes from the same pit, all right. In fact, the more he looked, the more they looked alike. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck begin to crawl.

"Good," he said, smiling broadly. "You shall share the rewards I have planned for your grandson."

We are all of us shape-changers. Li Zheng knew this and so she knew when the general was lying. But she smiled back with a grin that suddenly lacked several teeth. "It is a pleasure to serve such an illustrious conqueror," she said in a cracked, old voice. "Now, if you will excuse us, we have work to do."

The general didn't like being dismissed. Neither did he enjoy the company of sorcerers. He left them alone.

Li Zheng turned back to the kites. "Tell me about these," she said.

Huan did, and proudly. The first two he had painted with demon faces, thinking that it suited their purpose. But the third, and the one he painted now, were quiet scenes. Trees, birds, and the evening mist were simply more his style.

"By what magic do they fly?" she asked.

"Only the magic in the wind," he said, and he began to explain about the string and the bridle, the tail and the bow in the supple bamboo. But soon he was talking about how intriguing it was to build them and how rewarding to paint them. About how beautiful they looked, soaring in the wind, and how happy he felt to make them dance and spin by playing on the string.

Li Zheng looked from the kites to his face and saw beauty in both places. In his search for gods, he had found the spirit in himself.

"It is a shame that these will never fly," he said at last.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because I will destroy them when we escape," Huan said. "I would have destroyed them and killed myself before I went through with this."

"He would have killed you anyway as soon as you'd done it," she told him.

"Then I will have twice the pleasure in escaping," Huan said. "Tell me, what is your plan?"

"I don't have one," she admitted.

"But surely," Huan protested, "the gods have given —"

"I am not a god," she told him firmly, "nor was I sent by the gods."

"Then why are you here?" Huan asked, feeling very confused.

"I was drawn by the beauty of your creations," she replied.

"But it's dangerous here."

"It was worth it," she said.

Huan had to think about that for a second. He decided she must be a little senile. "Who are you?" he asked finally, "and how did you get here?"

"I am Li Zheng," she said, "and I flew here."

"You flew?"

"On the wings of an owl."

"Then you must be a goddess," he insisted. "Or else a . . ."

"A sorceress?" she finished for him. "Yes, I am a sorceress."

Huan's first flash of fear quickly gave way to elation. "Then escape is no problem," he told her. "You can simply put them all asleep with a spell or control their will or something. Can't you?"

Li Zheng shook her head. "I am not that type of sorceress," she said. "I am a shape-changer."

"That's all?" Huan said. "I mean, that's amazing, but . . . that's all?"

She nodded. "That's all."

"Well, then, turn yourself into a dragon and chase them away."

She laughed. "Huan," she said, "I flew here in the shape of an owl, but that owl weighed what I weigh. It was a giant owl. If I became a dragon, I would still weigh what I weigh. I'm afraid I would be a very small dragon."

Huan pondered this. More and more of his established beliefs were being destroyed. "Couldn't your giant owl carry me away in the night?" he asked.

Again she shook her head, and very sadly. "An owl that big can kill and carry a small deer," she said, "but a person your size is simply too heavy. Could one of your wind forms carry you? No, it would need to be much larger."

"Yes," he said, "I see." And he slumped down onto the rug.

Li Zheng put a brush into his hand. "Come," she said, "finish this beautiful painting. I will cut out silk for the next 'hat demon.'" She laughed at the name. "We will think of a way to escape these fools," she said.

Huan began to paint. That and her manner cheered him considerably. Soon he was humming as he worked, and she joined him, in a sweet, young voice. He looked up and saw her cutting the silk with young and nimble hands. Her limbs were straight, her body supple. Only her face stayed old. He felt a shiver crawl up his spine, but then she turned and saw him looking and gave him a wink. He couldn't help but smile back. He began to draw an old woman in the background of his painting.

And suddenly he wondered what she really looked like.

He finished the painting and began to build another kite, showing Li Zheng how to shape and tie the bamboo. A pair of kites later, they stopped to eat lunch, and she asked, "Couldn't we build one big enough to carry you out of the camp and over the river to safety?"

"General Liu Hsin comes in constantly to see how many are made," Huan told her. "He would see at once."

As if to prove his words, the general came in. Huan was looking at Li Zheng and saw how her body altered in an eyeblink. Once more she was his old grandmother from head to toe.

"Good afternoon, Great General," she said cheerily. "Come to watch us work, eh?" She doddered over and took his hand before he could respond, pulling him toward the kites. His aides were shocked. The general scowled fiercely and jerked his hand away.

Li Zheng paid no mind. "See?" she said, pointing. "We've finished two already since I arrived. Of course," she added, smiling crookedly, "we haven't charmed them yet. Can't do that till they have their leashes on. Wouldn't want them to run amok in the camp, would we?" Her smile took on a hungry look. Her teeth seemed longer and more pointed. Even Huan felt a little awed.

His men shivered, but Liu Hsin refused to be cowed. "How long before you finish," he demanded.

Huan started to answer, but Li Zheng doddered back over to the general, shaking her head and muttering, "Youth, youth, youth. Always in such a hurry." She took his hand again and patted it in a motherly way, still muttering. Then she closed her eyes and began to rock, and her muttering turned to strange syllables that Huan had never heard before.

The general nearly pulled her off her feet as he snatched his hand from her grasp. "Stop!" he ordered in a high voice, and then, more normally: "What do you think you're doing?"

"Just trying to instill a little patience," Li Zheng said innocently.

"Save your charms for the hat demons, old woman," the general growled. He turned and glared at Huan. "You said a week."

"Or two," Huan reminded him. Li Zheng had made him braver. "This has to work first time around."

Liu Hsin glowered at them in frustration. "Two weeks!" he snapped. "That's it!" And he stomped out of the tent.

WITHIN THE hour the general ordered another attack on the city gates with the ram. The defenders turned it back with cobblestones and burning rags, and the general had to content himself with having a few prisoners flayed.

Huan and Li Zheng continued to build kites. She made the frame and stretched the silk while he painted. They traded ideas for escape, but none held any promise. The general came less often, and glared at Li Zheng whenever she so much as looked at him. He fumed at their slowness, but the steadily growing lines of kites showed there was an end in sight.

One day, Li Zheng paused to watch Huan as he painted a beautiful crane in a pool below a waterfall. "There are no prayers on these kites," she said. "Only on the first three."

Huan nodded and kept painting.

"Have you given up on the gods?" she asked.

"These will never fly," he said curtly, still bent to his work.

"Of course," Li Zheng replied quietly, and she went back to bending the supple strips of bamboo.

Huan paused and looked at the kite before him. It seemed unfinished without words. They all did. But his flat and awkward prayers had failed him. Either the gods weren't paying attention up there in their gold-edged clouds, or they didn't care. Unless Li Zheng was his answer. "Yes," he

realized, "Li Zheng is my answer." But if the gods had sent her, they were cruel, for she had come to her death. He would rather believe she had come on her own. She was no less doomed, then, but her bravery was hers alone. He valued her company even more.

He watched her working, old face on a young body, and he wondered again what she really looked like. She talked often of flying and the joy it gave her, much like the joy he had felt flying his kites. He imagined her somehow as half woman and half bird. Under his hands the crane in the painting altered to match his vision. And when it was done, he began to write on the silk above it.

*Her brave heart bears my spirit
On winds of friendship
Sunward
Beyond shifting clouds*

So Huan became a poet. And after reading it over, he hid the words in lines of rain that fell from feathered mist and splashed diamonds in the pool around the crane.

Then he stood the kite at the end of the long line of kites that stretched around the edge of the tent. Li Zheng came to look, and if she saw the poem, she made no mention. But for a moment, her eyes shone with tears.

That night, Huan lay awake on his mat, listening to the wind playing in the trees beyond the camp. They would finish the kites in another day. Two at the most. And still they had no plan for escape. He realized he had to decide how best to destroy the kites, and himself.

He rose and lit a lamp and, by its flickering light, studied the long train of kites, thinking of death. Li Zheng sighed in her sleep behind him. For privacy, they had made a curtain of some silk between her mat and his. Now he went around and looked down at her. He went with no special thought other than to be close to this strange friend who had come to share his final days. But when he looked down, he didn't see the lined, old face he had come to know. There was a young woman sleeping on the mat.

For a moment, Huan wondered where Li Zheng could have gone, and how this other person could have gotten in. Then he realized. This was Li Zheng. This was her real face. He bent closet and studied it.

It was a plain face, simply a young version of the old woman, with all the magic hints of his own features removed, nothing remarkable. Nothing that made it a sorceress's face. Actually, Huan decided, it was a rather pleasant face, with a magic of its own. It was a face he was glad to have known.

He reached down and gently shook her shoulder. Her eyes opened, and he was looking again at the old woman.

"You must leave," he told her.

Li Zheng frowned and sat up, untangling herself from blanket and robe. "What do you mean?" she said.

"You must leave," he repeated. "Tonight, before we are done. Change to a bat or an owl and fly away."

"But we have to get you out," she said.

"There is no way for me," he said. "But you can fly high over the guards. There is almost no moon, and they won't be able to aim their arrows."

"There is still a day or two," she said.

"I won't risk it. You must go now."

She took his hand. "Do you care for me that much?" she asked.

He looked away, as most men do when they think people can see too deeply into their hearts. "I do," he said.

"I won't leave you," she said.

He turned to protest, and found himself looking at a stranger. Li Zheng had changed to a young woman, a beautiful heart-shaped image from an emperor's garden, with thin, arched eyebrows, the palest of skin, and a tiny red mouth. She bent forward to kiss him.

Huan rose quickly. He turned and walked across the tent. He stared stiffly at the line of kites, though he saw nothing.

After a moment she rose and followed. He didn't turn.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Did my changing scare you?"

"No," he said. "You don't scare me . . . anymore."

"Do you find me ugly?" she asked.

"No," he said, "I don't find you ugly." He turned then and spoke to her eyes. "I saw you sleeping, and you were beautiful. This you is too beautiful."

He saw confusion in her eyes. "But this face. . .," she began to say. And then she stopped and bowed her head. And when she raised it again, the face he saw was the face he loved.

They kissed and held each other tightly. She took the lamp from his hand and set it on the ground. She took his hand and led him to her mat. But then she looked back. Shadows danced in the spaces between the kites, and she could almost imagine they were flying in a long, graceful line. And that gave her an idea.

But she knew it would distract him, so first she drew him down to lie with her.

Her idea was simple enough: they would fly all of the kites on the same line. Together, the fifty would be strong enough to carry Huan to safety. She would let out the line and then follow in the shape of a bird. Listening to her tell it, Huan felt a small spark of hope. He embraced the plan with all the fervor of a gambler who had nothing to lose.

He spent the rest of the night and most of the morning making tails to stabilize the kites, and giving endless advice to Li Zheng on how to fly them. Li Zheng told the guards to bring them heavier line, and then began to braid that into a rope strong enough to bear Huan's weight. When General Liu Hsin came in at lunchtime, the tails and rope were hidden among the bales of silk and rolls of twine, and two half-finished kites were lying on the rug.

"How soon?" he demanded, as he always did.

Li Zheng cackled merrily. "There will be fifty tomorrow," she said.

Liu Hsin rubbed his hands together.

"Of course, it will take at least another day to charm them," Li Zheng added. "And then another day to regain our strength to be able to control them."

"Two more days?" the general bellowed.

"Unless you have several bolts of gold cloth," she told him. "If everyone wore gold robes, they would be protected."

"Ridiculous!" he snapped. He stormed back to his own tent, and immediately set his valet to work making a robe from a swatch of gilded silk he had taken from an earlier conquest.

Huan and Li Zheng went back to braiding rope.

When evening came, Huan quickly finished the two new kites. There were exactly fifty. He fastened a tail to each one and carefully adjusted the bridles. Then he tied a length of stout line to each bridle, making each length longer, so the kites would fly free of each other. Finally he wove fifty loops into one end of the rope, each an arm's length apart, while

Li Zheng continued braiding onto the other end.

As the sun fell, so did the wind. They sat inside together, quietly braiding rope and listening. The twilight passed, and their braiding slowed. The night was quiet and much too still. They heard the changing of the guard and the rustling of an army falling asleep. Finally they stopped braiding and sipped some tea, waiting. The tea chilled, and the night stayed still. Now and then the guard shifted with a soft rattle of weaponry.

Then, with a first fitful puff on the side of the tent, the wind returned. There was a second puff and a third, and they heard it in the trees. It billowed and steadied and grew stronger. Huan and Li Zheng embraced. Then she changed herself into the courtier maid she had briefly shown to Huan and slipped under the wall of the tent. Huan stood by the doorway flap, the teapot in his hands.

He heard her voice and the startled exclamation of the guard. He heard the sound of a maiden's tears, and the voice of the guard deepened and went soft. Huan quickly stepped outside and brought the teapot down on the guard's head with all his strength. The pot cracked open with a sound like a rotten gourd, and the guard dropped in a heap at their feet.

Together, they dragged him into the tent and bound him tightly with strips of silk. Then they began to carry the kites outside.

The wind became their enemy, grabbing at the kites and trying to steal them away. Finally Li Zheng went into the lee of the tent and held the kites facedown while Huan brought them out two by two. When they were all outside and under her precarious control, he took the first one and stepped out into the wind.

In an instant the kite was in the air and straining to go higher. He let it out to the end of its line and tied it to the first loop on the rope. The rope stirred. Li Zheng handed him the second kite, and then the third, and then the fourth. The rope lifted and went out, higher and higher, disappearing as though by magic into the night.

And as he added each kite, Huan felt the rope pull harder and harder against him, until he had to brace his shoulder against the tent rope to keep from being pulled away. Li Zheng slid the remaining kites closer and held them gently under one knee, handing them out with one hand and bracing the rope with the other.

Then there was one kite left, the kite with the crane and the poem.

Huan looped the rope around the tent stake, and Li Zheng held the end tightly, with her feet braced against the stake. Huan tied a harness between his legs and around his waist and then to the rope.

He took the final kite and sent it into the air. The wind was from the west, and the kite rose into the east, toward the river and safety and the sudden glow of dawn.

Huan felt the kite line go tight and tied it to the rope. It strained upward, reaching toward the sky. His heart went with it.

"Let it out," he whispered.

Li Zheng let the rope slide slowly through her hands. It burned her palms as it went, and Huan went with it, first walking, then on tiptoe, then in long, slow jumps. In the quickening dawn, he saw a large shadow looming before him. It was a tent, full of sleeping soldiers, square in his path. He took a mighty leap and soared into the air, clearing the peak pole by inches. He almost shouted with joy.

Li Zheng saw him lift into the air and let the rope slide more quickly. He dipped, a dark shadow that appeared to bob of its own accord at the end of her rope. She squeezed the rope again, and he rose away into the rising sun.

Then, with a great fountain of dirt, the tent stake pulled loose from the ground. The rope jerked from Li Zheng's hands, and she sprawled on the ground. There was a great popping and tearing over her head, and when he looked up, the entire roof of the tent was flapping along at waist height. It billowed into the soldiers' tent, snagged on the poles, and pulled the whole thing down in a tangle of ropes and canvas and screaming men. The kites shot into the sky until the rope was almost vertical.

Li Zheng changed into a giant falcon. She flew to the kite rope and began slashing at it with her beak. Soldiers came running and shouting from every direction and then stood still in horror when they saw the giant bird attacking the tent. No one noticed the rope leading into the sky and the ladder of kites glowing in the high rays of the rising sun.

Until General Liu Hsin came striding up. He saw the bird, saw the rope, and saw Huan Po hanging in his harness high in the sky.

"Shoot!" he cried. "Shoot the bird, or I'll flay you all!"

His men feared him more than they feared any demon. A dozen arrows sprang from a dozen bows. Two of them struck home.

Li Zheng cried in pain and gave one more fearsome slash at the rope.

It parted, and the kites soared eastward toward the river. But they also started to drop, and the rope swung down toward the swarm of soldiers ringing the fallen tent.

"Grab it!" Liu Hsin ordered, and a dozen men leaped for the wildly swinging rope.

Li Zheng swooped down on them, shrieking and clashing her beak. They fell to the ground in fear, but another pair of arrows found a mark. Li Zheng soared up out of range, beating her great wings with every ounce of her draining strength.

But still the kites were falling. Huan Po was too heavy for the untethered kites. Li Zheng flew past him, the feathers of her wing tip brushing his face. She forced herself up to the height of the highest kite. She grabbed it with her talons. And she changed herself into a giant cloud of a kite.

Imagine a kite that weighed as much as a grown woman, even a small woman like Li Zheng. It seemed to eclipse the rising sun. And on the silk was the fierce face of a giant falcon, eyes shining with rage. The soldiers fell to their knees, and nothing General Liu Hsin could threaten would make them rise to aim their bows. The kites rose and soared across the river, with Huan Po swinging in his harness beneath them.

Then the land warmed and the wind died, as it always does at the doorways between the light and dark. The kites sank to the ground, one by one, dragging Huan Po across a field of newly cut grain. He struggled to untie the harness and fend off the sharp stalks, until he could finally stand and hold the rope and guide the giant kite gently to the ground.

He ran to it, past the jumbled shards of fifty smaller kites. Its silk was torn in a dozen places. The supple bamboo shafts were broken. A drop of blood fell from the falcon's mouth.

Then, as he watched, the face changed to Li Zheng. Huan knew she was dying.

He cried out to the sky, cursing General Liu Hsin and his army, cursing the gods, cursing his kites and himself. But her voice said, "Stop. Don't curse your wind pictures. They are too beautiful."

The face on the giant kite smiled at him. The eyes closed. The kite began to reshape itself to the broken body of Li Zheng.

"No, Li Zheng!" Huan cried. "Please. Change yourself into a sword or a bow, something I can use to avenge your death on General Liu Hsin."

The eyes opened one more time and looked at him sadly. But then she smiled again and nodded. And with her dying thought, Li Zheng changed into a pile of light silk and supple bamboo shafts and balls of twine. And on the top were bamboo tubes and a dozen bone rattles.

That night the weather changed, and a strong, cold wind blew from the east. Just after midnight, General Liu Hsin and his army were roused by a wild, discordant wailing in the sky. It came nearer, swooping over their heads. In the pitch black of the new moon, they could almost see demon shapes soaring and diving over their heads. They could hear demon voices and the clashing of demon teeth.

The men who had first captured Huan recognized that sound. They ran through the camp, shrieking that the demons had come back for vengeance. Other men heard and threw down their weapons and began to run away. Horses reared and shied, kicking at the sky, and tore loose from their tethers and raced among the camp.

General Liu Hsin strode from his tent in his new golden robe. He stood before the fleeing tide of terror-stricken soldiers and commanded them to turn and fight. They trampled him in their fear. His valet threw his numb body over the back of a deaf and blindered horse and took him away. The dawn rose over an empty and shattered camp.

Huan Po ground his kites and tied them securely to a tree. Then he walked up the bank from the river and through the camp to the great green gates of the city of Pi Lao. Fearfully, the guards let him in.

He spent the rest of his days making and flying kites with the children of the town, and with many of their parents, too. He learned to make kites in circles and ovals and squares, but mostly he favored the shapes of birds — falcons and owls and giant cranes. He painted them beautifully. And each one bore a poem.

And whenever someone new came to the city of Pi Lao and saw his beautiful sky paintings and asked what they were, Huan Po said they were called Feng Zheng.

Feng, of course, means wind.



F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 54

RUNNERS UP

In the July issue, we postulated that the recession had become so bad, writers had to release cut-down versions of their own works. You sent us the titles of your austerity favorites

We had the best response we've had in years. All the entries were fun but many duplicated each other (SANDBOX for DUNE was the most common).

FIRST PRIZE

PODUNK, PODUNK, DO YOU READ? by James Tiptree Jr.

NO ENEMY BUT HALF-TIME by Michael Bishop

THE FORGE OF GOSH by Greg Bear

THE LAST HURRAH OF THE GOPHER HORDE by Norman Spinrad

AMTRAK TROOPERS by Robert A. Heinlein

THE SHIP WHO SANK by Anne McCaffrey

— Paul Petrella
Minneapolis, MN

SECOND PRIZE

DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF PINK BATTERY-RUN BUNNIES? by Philip K. Dick

THE MOON IS A PICKY BIMBO by Robert A. Heinlein

WHEN WORLDS NUDGE by Philip Wylie & Edwin Balmer

— M. Sullivan
Cincinnati, OH

DREAMSLUG by Vonda McIntyre
DIRT CLOUDS IN THE NET by Bruce Sterling

SOMETHING WICKED IS HEAD-
ING FOR A NEARBY TOWN by Ray Bradbury

LUCIFER'S THUMBTRACK by Larry Niven & Jerry Pournelle

— Orson Scott Card
Greensboro, NC

THAT by Stephen King

ENTROPY'S SOFA SLEEPER AT
MIDNIGHT by Dan Simmons

THUNDERBIRD OF THE DREAM-
ERS by John D. MacDonald

— Douglas F. Wood
Parma, OH

HONORABLE MENTIONS

LITTLE VELCRO by H. Beam Piper

E PLURIBUS AUK by Theodore Sturgeon

— Harlan Ellison
Sherman Oaks, CA

THE GODS SNICKERED by Frederic Brown

PRINCESS BRIDESMAID by William Goldman

— Carla Henry
St. Charles, MO

THE INCONVENIENCED by Ursula K. LeGuin

— William J. Keck
Staten Island, NY

THE MOTE IN QUAYLE'S EYE by MIFFED SWEETS by Harlan Ellison
 Larry Niven & Jerry Pournelle — Dan Lakey, Jr.
 — Timothy E. Walters Gambier, OH
 Muskogee, OK

OF NOTE

Only two writers followed the rules to the letter and did austerity versions of *their own* titles:

John Brunner: THE TRIANGLES OF THE CITY; PARTIAL ECLIPSE; BABIES OF THE THUNDER; THE LAMBS LOOK UP (or THE SHEEP LOOK STRAIGHT AHEAD); PLAYERS AT THE GAME OF PERSON; and STAND ON STATEN ISLAND.

Orson Scott Card: SPEAKER FOR THE SICK; BEIGE PROPHET



COMPETITION 55 (suggested by Amy McCormick)

CLICHES OF THE FUTURE:

Take a popular cliché and update it for today's (or a future) use. For example:

"A microchip off the old block"

"Can't keep his mind out of the toxic waste disposal factory"

Please send us the new and improved clichés — the funnier the better.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by December 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks. Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 55 will appear in the April Issue.



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Coming Attractions

AS THE northern climes nestle under a blanket of snow, and the southern regions worry about freezing temperatures and frost, we're ringing in the new year by bringing back some old favorites. **John Brunner** returns to these pages with another in the "Mr. Secrett" series which has been running in F&SF for years. "The Man Who Lost the Game of Life" is perhaps the ultimate in "Mr. Secrett" stories — one of the best ever.

Mad-cap humorist **Ron Goulart** contributes a tale of a woebegone editor named Hershey looking for job security. Throw in a bit of notoriety, black magic, and sorcery, and you have all the ingredients for "Hershey's Kisses" — a story that's as fine as chocolate, and not quite as sweet.

And finally, **Robert Reed** contributes a stunning sf story about life after death. Technology has made it possible for Clay to continue living even after his body has quit functioning, but does that mean his relationship with himself and his world will remain the same?

We'll have these stories and more in the January 1992 issue. And as the "new" year transforms into "this" year, we'll bring you a wonderful array of stories, including tales of the heart from **Kit Reed**, **A.R. Morlan**, and **Carolyn Ives Gilman**. We'll also feature new stories from **Jack C. Haldeman**, **Barry N. Malzberg** and **Harry Turtledove**. We promise that 1992 will be one of our most interesting years yet.

THE NATIONAL FANTASY FAN FEDERATION (N3F) celebrates its 50th year with our 30th annual amateur SF and fantasy short story contest. Send SASE for rules and entry blank to Donald Franson, 6543 Babcock Ave., North Hollywood, CA 91606. Mention F&SF.

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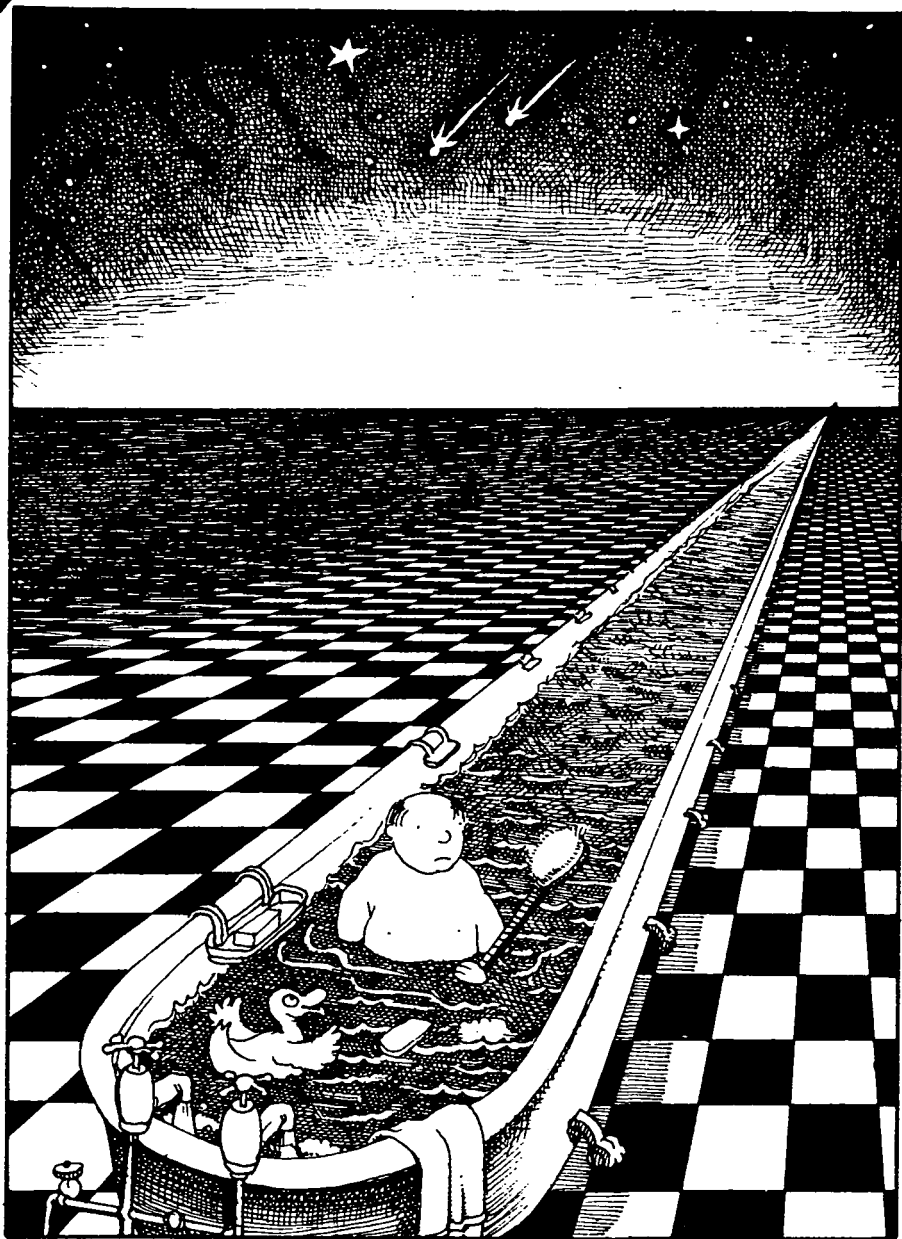
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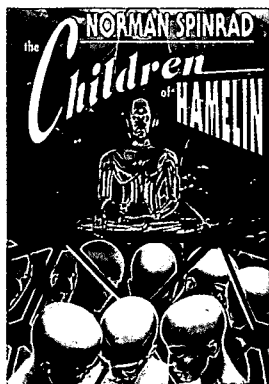
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